



LOCAL GOVERNANCE CLUSTER

MONTHLY UPDATE



FEBRUARY 2008

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WORKSHOP ON DIFFERENT CAPACITY BUILDING APPROACHES FOR STRENGTHENING UNION PARISAD IN BANGLADESH

Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) and Research Initiatives for Participatory Action (RIPA) have jointly organized a half day sharing workshop on different capacity building approaches for strengthening Union Parisads in Bangladesh on February 26, 2008 at National Institute of Local Governance Auditorium. Mr. Md. Nojibur Rahman, Joint Secretary (Administration), Local Government Division has been the special guest and Mrs. Durafshan Chowdhury from UNDP moderated the whole session. Representatives from donor agencies as such from European Commission and Danida as well as members of different local NGOs were present to attend the workshop. Three consecutive national workshops have been arranged by VSO in Khulna, Sirajganj and Dhaka before this workshop. VSO facilitated participatory group work with participants in those workshops, mapping on basis of approaches pursued by different donors and NGOs and identified learning, challenges and recommendations on basis of various approaches. In the 26th February workshop VSO presented their findings and remarked that in absence of any coordination among the various approaches



they have found duplication of activities by different agencies in the same area, even sometimes overlapping. Such lack of coordination could not bring positive fruit to the country and so they asked to form a common platform to make a consensus among different donors who have been supporting for strengthening UP with different approaches. VSO also expressed that they would soon publish a report to make a clear understanding on how different approach could supplement and complement each other.

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NEW PROGRAMME ASSOCIATE IN THE LOCAL GOVERNANCE CLUSTER



Rafiqul has joined the Local Governance Cluster on 6th February, 2008 as Programme Associate. He facilitates management of the programme for programme development. This includes

facilitating in resource mobilization, formulation of programme strategies and implementation of the Country Programme Action Plan, and participatory overseeing the implementation of the programme. He extends Administrative and Financial support to the Programme Unit. He does knowledge building and knowledge sharing.

However, he previously worked as a Senior Project Manger of Eusuf and Associates, which business is to socio-economic monitoring and impact as well as performance evaluation of development projects. Again, he

was the Divisional Team Leader of the Post Literacy and Continuing Education for Human Development Project, which is governed by ministry of primary and mass education, and financed by WB and SDC. He was the Project Development Officer of EC project AsiaUrbs Sylhet Partnership, which was a tripartite partnership between Tower Hamlets in UK, Horsens in Denmark and Sylhet City Corporation in Bangladesh.

Furthermore, He is a social researcher and development analyst. He published couple of articles in the Daily Star and in the Independent on governance, administration and development issues in Bangladesh. He is a Master of social sciences in Public administration (Dhaka University '98).

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'FORM SELF-ADMINISTERED LOCAL GOVERNMENT TO INSTITUTIONALIZE DEMOCRACY'

LGRD Adviser Anwarul Iqbal speaks at a seminar titled 'The Democratic Local Government System of Bangladesh' at Hotel Sheraton in the city yesterday. The seminar was organised by scholarsbangladesh.com as part of the First Non-Resident Bangladeshi Conference 2007. Self-administered local government with financial solvency and accountability should be formed to institutionalise democracy in the country, said the speakers at a seminar yesterday. They said a strong local government system is a crying need to lessen dependency on the central government.

The seminar titled 'The Democratic Local Government System of Bangladesh' was held as part of the first conference of Non-Resident Bangladeshis organised by ScholarsBangladesh at Sheraton Hotel in the city. A book titled 'Gonotantrik Sthaniya Sarkarer Ruprekha' (Outline of Democratic Local Government) was launched on this occasion. In his book Abu Taleb, a researcher now living in New York, gave 25 outlines for proper democratisation of local government. He pointed out that the local government system should be divided into two parts.

The city corporations and municipalities will be urban local government while rural local government will be formed with the districts, upazilas and union parishads, he added. He said power division in local government is also important for its proper functioning and

local government should be separated from legislative body.

Speaking as special guest Secretary to LGRD and Cooperatives ministry Safar Raj Hossain talked about government's vision of local governance, government's initiatives to strengthen local government institutions, and implementation of viable recommendations of the Reform Committee.

He also spoke about women ward commissioners who actually don't get any chance to work and face discriminations. However, the City Corporation Act has been changed recently and in absence of the city mayors, a mayor panel has been formed where a position for woman has been made compulsory, said Adviser to LGRD and Cooperatives ministry Anwarul Iqbal.

Speaking as chief guest he said a unified act for the city corporations would be made for its implementation before the next city corporation elections. "We should also think of ways to strengthen local government financially," he added.

ME Chowdhury Shamim of Scholars' Publishers, Advocate Bashir Ahmed and Barrister Mahbub Uddin also spoke at the seminar.

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'TRAIN LOCAL PROFESSIONALS TO EXTRACT NATURAL RESOURCES'

The government should take initiatives to train local professionals to extract natural resources in order to reduce dependency on foreign experts, former chief justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman said yesterday.

He also said that the country often falls victim to massive natural disasters, but no steps have been taken so far to protect the life and property from such catastrophes.

Justice Rahman was speaking at a national symposium on 'Engineering and Technological Education at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet)' as the chief guest.

BUET organised the symposium as part of the celebrations marking 60 years of engineering education in Bangladesh.

BUET Vice-Chancellor Prof AMM Safiullah chaired the event. VC of the University of Asia

Pacific Abdul Matin Patwari and Convener of the organising committee Prof Md Mazaharul Hoque were also present.

Presenting a keynote paper, former Buet VC Prof Iqbal Mahmud said engineering education was recognised as a separate academic discipline about 200 years ago and since then engineers have been trying to shift their focus from a natural world to a man-made world.

He said intellectual challenge for the undergraduate should be substantially equivalent to international standard.

"To face the challenge of 21st century, we have to provide education that helps develop innovative ideas. Humanities, arts and social sciences are now a must for creative engineers," he added.

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STRENGTHENING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

The strengthening of local government institutions to address major issues like poverty reduction, good governance, infrastructure development, disaster management etc. is no more a matter of controversy, rather it is a consensus of the whole nation.

For a rural, agro-based national economy and a populace with minimum demand from life, an efficient and dedicated local government can deliver services and generate social and economic awareness to achieve the national goals of Bangladesh.

Keeping in view these priorities and necessities, a grand assembly of local government representatives was arranged on January 5 at Parade Square, Dhaka, to discuss at length the recommendations of the committee constituted for strengthening local government. The Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives deserves appreciation for organising such a gathering of elected representatives, perhaps the biggest one ever held during this government's tenure.

This has, in fact, created an opportunity for exchanging views and understanding between the central government and the local level representatives to remove confusion, if any.

The chief adviser, chief of the army staff, adviser in charge of local government in their deliberations made it clear that they had every intention of decentralising, and devolving the authority to local governments. They have, however, emphasised the election of honest,

dedicated and capable representatives to ensure good governance, and build up a just, equitable and enlightened society.

The salient features of the recommendations of the committee, headed by Health Adviser Dr. A M M Shawkat Ali, were made public and discussed in detail, and the representatives were invited to comment on them. The three-tier local government institutions -- zila parishad, upazila parishad and union parishad - - and the city corporations and municipalities would be strengthened with the enactment of two Acts as proposed by the committee. A union parishad will have 15 wards in lieu of 9, and women's representation might be raised to 40 percent.

Besides, service rules, need-based manpower, source of revenue, capability building, computerisation at all levels, eligibility of candidates, transparency and accountability of the parishads etc., as suggested by the committee were discussed. The concept of gram sarkar did not find a place in the recommendation, whereas the city government idea formulated by mayors was kept for consideration. The announcement of the enhancement of honorarium of local representatives received applause from almost 8000 representatives present in the assembly.

The most important issue for consideration now is about the timing of the election. An experienced school of thought feels that dedicated, capable and dignified non-partisan representatives would have fair chances of being elected if local government election is

arranged prior to the National Parliament election.

This will eventually help reduce party conflicts, false voting, and demonstration of financial and muscle strength to influence the voters, which negate the concept of free and fair election. Secondly, the genuineness of the voter list can be verified, and corrections made. Thirdly, the importance of the National Assembly election will be reduced if the upazilla election is held earlier, and local government representatives are in their positions. Fourthly, this will obviously create confidence about the process of election.

Another group is of the view that the understanding in the process of planning and development could be coherent provided the central and the local governments think along the same wavelength. In the absence of such a situation, the central government might supersede many local bodies to see its own men in power in the resultant vacancy.

The election of 4498 union parishads, 480 upazila parishads, 390 municipalities, and 6 city corporations is not an easy task. It might require few months to complete, and it is not possible to hold the Parliament election at the same time. Therefore, June or July to complete the National Assembly election before the end of 2008 might hold the local government election.

In Bangladesh, elections were held many times before. There were elections for National Assembly 8 times; on March 7, 1973, February 18, 1979, May 7, 1986, March 3, 1988, February 27, 1991, February 15, 1996, June 12, 1996, October 1, 2001. There were presidential elections 8 times, and referendum 3 times; on May 30, 1977; March 21, 1985 and September 15, 1991.

Besides, there were union parishad elections 7 times, city corporation 5 times, municipal elections 7 times, and upazila elections 2 times. Bangladeshis enjoy election fever, and take so much interest that some candidates consider victory or defeat as the prestige of their family and tradition.

There is no controversy about the strengthening of local government, even among the politicians, though there is difference of opinion about the election of upazila parishad, even within the same political party. Some politicians are of the view that elected upa-zila chairmen might radically reduce the importance of MPs in the locality. This was the only reason for which, on different occasions, cabinet meetings could not come to a decision about the election of upazila parishad.

Thus, the upazila system has been a non-functional institution since 1991, although the infrastructure and manpower are in situ in the name of upazila. On the other hand, an unconstitutional post of district minister was created to assert the influence of the party in power in the district.

The timing, and the process of holding election of the local government should be left to the Election Commission, as it is the prerogative of the Commission. The Commission should be given signal after the reform measures taken by the government to go ahead with the election. Local government elections, if organised freely and fairly on a level playing field before the Parliament election will have obvious reflection in the national level.

The Election Commission must be independent and capable of operating with adequate manpower and resources to act and decide for the restoration of democracy at the grassroots level, and establishment of democratic practices in the country.

In India, the Election Commission brought heterogeneous political parties under the umbrella of strong discipline when T N Shesha was the chief.

We are waiting for the day when our citizens will feel proud of our election system and see democracy in practice.

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DECENTRALIZATION CAN REDUCE CORRUPTION

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

Doing things at random or in a lackadaisical manner (in the expression of our dear one, late Mezbahuddin Ahmed, popularly known as Bulu Bhai) never accomplishes the desired outcome. Such unplanned action invariably turns out to be colossal wastage of time, money and energy.

Coincidentally, this sort of unproductive investment, particularly in the public sector, creates lot of dissension and despair among the ultimate beneficiaries. More so, when such casually worked out projects aimed at granting infrastructural benefits to the people in the locality eventually become utterly infructuous.

Traditionally, if not in all cases, most of the public utility projects initiated by any government in this part of the subcontinent have been politically motivated. Most of the development projects initiated and implemented either fully or partially during the tenure of a politically elected government have always been party-biased.

Bureaucratic red-tape has been always the main hurdle in the process of implementation. Consequently, there have been ample instances of rescheduling of the period of implementation and corresponding escalation of project cost due to time lag. On top of everything, the awarding of contracts quite often passes through weird process favouring undeserving ones.

The decision in all such cases is made on flimsy grounds, sometimes rejecting the best offer. All these machinations are made possible at the personal instance of some "mighty" people behind the scene, having direct or indirect access to the power center.

This is just a partial picture of the situation obtaining in the development activities of the public sector since long. The Annual Development Program (ADP) of the government, worked out every year for implementation across the country, has been mostly bereft of national bias. It is quite often parochial in nature, projected to fulfil partisan

interests. The implementing ministries, directorates or departments are supposed to monitor the progress of the work, and ensure that there is no compromise in the use of materials, or deviation from the approved plan. In actual practice, however, things do not always go the desired way.

The contractor or the sub-contractor providing construction materials invariably makes "adjustments" that would adequately compensate his investments for getting the work. He is under heavy pressure of the supervising departmental engineer during implementation of the work order. The contractor keeps him in confidence on the use of materials, their quality and proportion so as to get his tacit and unwritten approval of the compromises made.

And when the time for payment of final bill, certification by the work supervisor and endorsement by the departmental head for payment comes, the accountant and the cashier, concerned clerks, peons etc -- all await receipt of their respective, fixed share of the "profit."

There is no reason to believe that, despite the unjustifiable "surcharge" at different phases of the actual work, the contractor will sacrifice his share of the net profit so as not to compromise in respect of quality and quantity of the materials. Nor there is any scope for him to strictly adhere to the requirements of the approved plan in any manner in the face of the above mentioned realities pervading this particular area since long. That's why newly built roads and highways have potholes all the way within a short time, roofs of buildings funnel down rainwater even after a brief and light shower, some cave in being deprived of support from the cracked walls. People's lives and properties are the casualties.

As usual, committees appointed for the purpose, reports are submitted but are seldom made known, carry out investigations. They are consigned to cold storage for an indefinite period, and, in the meantime, those responsible are either transferred to some other places on

promotion or are elevated to higher positions at the same place.

This is a very common scenario in almost all other areas where the political party in power initiates development activities. And, traditionally, this is the largest segment where political consideration in respect of benefit dispensation is preponderant. As a result, "sharing of the booty" gets topmost priority, notwithstanding the eligibility of the beneficiaries.

The devastating cyclone Sidr along the coastal belt of the southern districts of Bangladesh and the Sundarbans revealed the total indifference of all the political parties towards the people in the aforesaid areas. Although such natural calamities have been an ever-recurring phenomenon in those parts of the country, the Disaster Management Department of the government is yet to make any substantial and tangible effort, preemptive as well as preventive, at curtailing the damage to life and property.

In particular, much more needs to be done to improve the state of the cyclone shelters in the stated region. The existing centers are spread out over several miles, and are beyond quick reach of many in emergencies. Consequently, the loss of lives, of people and domestic animals, and of other essential household materials has been many times more than one can imagine.

Subsequent to the ruthless lashing of Sidr, accompanied by the ever rising waves of the mighty Bay of Bengal and the rivers nearby, the whole area lay dead and barren, with trees and plants uprooted, households and shanties razed to the ground, and standing crops in the field awaiting harvest damaged beyond salvation. More cyclone shelters near the track of the monster could have saved many people who couldn't reach the existing ones due to their distance.

The survivors have already raised a demand for increasing the number of the shelters, brining them within easy reach of everyone. Every time angry nature rips through human habitations along the coastal belt and places nearby, it takes heavy toll of human lives, ransacks homesteads, kills or washes away livestock etc. And every time, political leaders

and bureaucrats shed "crocodile's tears" in expressing sympathy for the affected. They make promises to build more and more cyclone shelters, in appreciation of the calamitous situation befalling the common people.

In actual practice, however, there remains a big gap between such wordy promises and realistic, desirable anticipation of crises generating from natural disasters. Even though there may be, at times, certain advances in that direction they fall through when put on the anvil. They are stuck up, either in the beginning or mid-way, due to cumbersome and outdated process of implementation.

Our experience till now has proved beyond doubt that a radical change in the process of planning, providing required financial sanction and support, and in the process of implementation -- totally free from the typical intervention of bureaucracy -- will have to be ensured before it is too late.

Particularly in the matter of infrastructure building across the country, things will have to be considered in a national perspective and priorities fixed in accordance with geographical location of each disaster-prone place in the country.

In my personal estimation, the bottlenecks frequently occurring in the development sector are mostly due to centralisation of the policy options in this particular area of investment in the public sector. Added to this the human factor, with diverse and yet personal aggrandisement for material gains, has been ever intruding in preposterous manner. The ultimate cost-benefit analysis of any infrastructure purportedly erected for the common people of the locality presents a reverse ratio.

This is a perpetual malady, awaiting urgent curative measures by the government. To start with, the ADP can be segmented into six divisional programmes, each headed by the respective divisional commissioner. In turn, each divisional commissioner will lead a task force (implementation sub-committee) duly authorised by the government. Such sub-committees will include deputy commissioners as member-secretaries, chief engineer of PWD in the divisional headquarters, and head of the

concerned department for which a project is approved for implementation.

They should also include the head of the civil engineering department of the engineering university/college at divisional headquarters, environmentalists in leading position, noted social activists, non-political headmen representing the project area, headmasters of high schools, and women representatives. At the district and upazila levels, similar sub-committees headed by deputy commissioners and UNOs will be responsible for implementation of projects in their respective areas.

In each case, contractors will have to go through a pre-qualification process for

enlistment, based on the value of each project. The head, the member-secretary, and the engineering head/related head will comprise the monitoring team in every case. Upon their authentication, bills of the contractors will be paid by the concerned accountants. This is just an outline of the proposition.

It may be further developed objectively by the appropriate level of the government as it would curb corrupt practices now rampant at every stage. Let there be total decentralisation in the first place. It may not be a panacea for all ills, but it will certainly pave the way to a different scenario from now.

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CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION STRESSED FOR GOOD LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Speakers at a view exchange meeting yesterday said transparency, accountability and citizens' participation in different development works and in formulation of budgets have become essential for good local governance as well as poverty reduction.

Self-reliance is needed to strengthen local government and this becomes possible when citizens are sure of good returns, they said at the meeting for sharing achievement of Sharique, a local governance programme with Inter Cooperation of Care Bangladesh at Nanking Darbar Hall.

Rajshahi Divisional Local Government Director Azahar Ali attended the meeting as chief guest with Sharique regional coordinator Tirtha Sarathi Sikdar in the chair. Acting Country Representative of Water Aid M Azahar Ali, Sanitation Specialist of WFP-World Bank Santonu Lahiri and Deputy Secretary of the Local Government Division Shafikul Islam were present as the resource

persons. The workshop was participated by all UP chairmen and members of the upazila, teachers, journalists, socio-cultural activists, local elite and professionals.

Sharique programme is helping union parishads manage public affairs in a more effective said several union parishad chairmen and members in a special discussion arranged for sharing their experiences.

Satyendra Kumar Sarker, additional deputy commissioner (Education), Mahbulul Islam Khan, governance coordinator of Care, Prasanta Tripura, national coordinator of Sharique, also spoke.

Funded by Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Sharique programme is supporting local government functioning in 100 unions in Rajshahi and Sunamganj districts.

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GOVERNMENT TO ABOLISH GRAM SARKER

The government on Sunday decided in principle to abolish the ancient system of Gram Sarker, a spokesman said. The interim cabinet gave initial approval to Gram Sarker (Annulment) Ordinance 2008, at its regular meeting chaired by the chief adviser, Fakhruddin Ahmed, at his office. The ordinance will be sent to the law ministry for further review.

The concept of Gram Sarker (village government) stemmed from isolated local development efforts by local administrators in the so-called Panchayat system. In 1980, the experimental system received political attention from the administration of Ziaur Rahman who appeared to have believed in the system of 'mass mobilisation for rural development'. 'After examining the ordinance further, the council of advisers will give final approval,' the chief adviser's press secretary Syed Fahim Munaim told reporters after the meeting.

The committee formed with adviser AMM Shawkat Ali as its head to strengthen the local government bodies recommended abolition of Gram Sarker Act, passed by the four-party alliance government in 2003. Munaim said the meeting had also approved a plan to build apartments for government officials on public land through shared ownership with private developers.

'Construction firms will be appointed through bidding. The flats will be allocated to the officials at comparatively low prices for 99 years,' Munaim said. He said the concept paper for 20-year 'Strategic Transport Plan' for greater Dhaka was presented at the meeting. The cabinet gave the green light to the concept paper. The cabinet decided to hold its March 5 meeting in the southern town of Barisal. The day before the meeting, the advisers would visit Sidr-ravaged areas. Earlier, the council of advisers held a meeting in Rangpur town.

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RECASTING THE UPAZILA PARISHAD ACT EDITORIAL

The caretaker government's decision to bring in changes to the Upazila (UZ) Parishad Act of 1998 is timely and apt. This is welcome mainly because of the nature of the two changes that are waiting for the law ministry's nod before being passed as ordinance.

One of the amendments will prevent the unnecessary, and certainly detrimental, interference of the local MPs because of their role in the function of the parishads provided for in the 1998 UZ Parishad Act. The second amendment will revert back to the EC the authority to decide the election schedule of the Parishad, which had heretofore been in the hands of the government.

The UZ happens to be a very important tier of the government that allows devolution of power to the local authorities in achieving efficient governance, particularly in the realm of economic development, at the local level. It was sad to see the BNP's efforts during its tenure in 1991, to negate the idea of the UZ

system altogether, by dissolving the system; and in spite of the Supreme Court's orders to hold the UZ elections, it did not comply. Now that the authority to decide on the elections dates has devolved on the EC it will, we hope, spare the system the partisan intrusion into the running of its affairs. Most of all, election to the Parishad will not depend on the political whims of the party in power, as we saw happen since the passage of the 1998 Act, when election proposals were shot down by senior ministers and lawmakers.

Allowing the local representatives a role in the UZ Parishad activities was not very prudent either. The caretaker government has fulfilled a longstanding demand to rid the UZ system of a shortcoming, which had stood in the way of its efficient functioning.

The MP's job is to legislate, not administer. Unfortunately, the Act of 1998 introduced by the AL witnessed not only undue influence but the Parishads were subjected also to

tremendous pressure by MPs having conflicting and divergent interests. The consequent abuse of power and corruption were there for all to see.

Needless to say, the local government institution has to be strengthened if Bangladesh

is to develop through grassroots level participation. We hope that the two amendments will go a long way in achieving that objective.

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MP INFLUENCE IN UPAZILA TO GO--GOVERNMENT DECIDES TO EMPOWER EC TO HOLD LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLLS

The caretaker government yesterday decided to revoke the power of members of parliament (MP) over upazila parishads, and to empower the Election Commission (EC) to hold polls to the parishads, a crucial tier of the local government system. The council of advisers to caretaker government at a meeting approved a proposal to amend the current Upazila Parishad Act 1998 repealing a provision that allows local representatives to the parliament to interfere in the activities of upazila parishads.

It also approved a proposal to empower the EC with its lost authority to announce election schedules for upazila parishads once again, shifting the power back to the commission from the central government, sources said.

The council of advisers, which is the interim cabinet, sent the proposals to the law ministry for vetting. Once the procedures are completed, the president will promulgate an ordinance amending the current Upazila Parishad Act, said Syed Fahim Munaim, press secretary to the chief adviser, during a post meeting news briefing. "Lawmakers will have no role in upazila parishads once the current law is amended," Adviser MM Shawkat Ali told The Daily Star last night.

In the wake of a long standing demand for repealing the authorities of lawmakers over local government institutions, the caretaker government took the decision in a bid to strengthen the local government system, making it free of interference from the central government.

At the meeting, Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed said the caretaker government wants to implement soon the recommendations of a committee on strengthening the local government system.

The LGRD and cooperatives ministry moved the proposals for bringing amendments to the Upazila Parishads Act 1998. Although the law was introduced in 1998, no government since then initiated steps to hold polls to upazila parishads as senior ministers and lawmakers vehemently opposed the move.

The last Awami League (AL) government passed the Upazila Parishad Act empowering the EC to announce schedules for the parishad elections.

However, amid a volatile political situation, the then EC could not hold the polls and later the government amended the upazila law and took away the authority from the EC.

Section 25 of the current law empowers lawmakers to become advisers to upazila parishads which are bound to accept their suggestions. Once the amendments are brought to the current laws, lawmakers will have no power over upazila parishads and the EC will have the power to announce schedules for parishad polls through discussions with the central government, instead of taking approval from it.

The first election to upazila parishads was held in 1985 after its introduction in the local government system during the regime of military ruler HM Ershad. But the very existence of upazila parishads faced a severe crisis following the second election in 1990 when Ershad stepped down in the face of a mass movement.

A BNP government assumed power in 1991 and dissolved the upazila system. The Supreme Court in a judgment in 1992 directed the government to hold elections to upazila parishads within six months, but the BNP

government did not hold the polls during its tenure. Assuming power through the 1996 general elections, Awami League passed the Upazila Parishad Act in 1998.

The immediate past BNP-led alliance government, which came to power through the 2001 general election, moved for holding upazila parishad elections this time and formed a cabinet committee for the purpose. But the committee members failed to reach a consensus on holding the polls.

All those governments meanwhile sought extension of time on many occasions from the Supreme Court to comply with its directives for holding the polls. The current caretaker government now moved for holding the upazila parishad elections and assured the EC of regaining its power to announce the poll schedules for over 450 of those.

The EC in its electoral roadmap announced on July 15 last year declared that the long due polls to the upazila parishads will be held between November and December this year. A number of advisers to the caretaker government recently said polls to the upazila parishads should be held simultaneously with the parliamentary election, which is scheduled for December 2008.

The committee on restructuring and strengthening the local government recently placed a set of recommendations to the chief adviser including a recommendation to form upazila Parishads. The council of advisers are scheduled to meet again tomorrow.

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WORK ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION INITIATED

The interim government has taken initiatives to set up a local government commission, apparently to strengthen local government bodies, in the shortest possible time.

A LGRD and cooperatives ministry meeting on strengthening local government institutions on Wednesday formed a committee to work out a draft law for the commission within a week.

‘The move for establishing the proposed local government commission is now under way. The local government division is now working to prepare a draft ordinance on the local government commission,’ the LGRD and cooperatives adviser, Anwarul Iqbal, told New Age.

He said the ministry had examined the already-drafted laws by a high-powered committee on strengthening local government bodies. The mode of operation of the commission is yet to be finalised. ‘We have found the draft incomplete. The new committee, led by a joint secretary of the local government division, has been asked to submit a complete law within a week,’ the adviser said, adding the draft ordinance for the commission would be placed before the council of advisers in the shortest possible time for approval.

The meeting behind closed doors, presided over by the adviser, discussed the legal aspects

and the mode of operation of the proposed commission. Draft laws — Local Government (City Corporation) Ordinance 2007, Local Government (Municipality) Ordinance 2007 and Local Government (Union Parishad, Upazila Parishad and Zila Parishad) Ordinance — framed by the committee on strengthening local government will also be sent to the cabinet soon for approval.

‘We will place the draft ordinance for the city corporations on priority before the council of advisers’ meeting soon as elections to such local bodies have already been due,’ Iqbal said. Formed on June 3, 2007, the local body strengthening committee has recommended setting up a local government commission to monitor and evaluate the overall activities of the local government bodies as the LGRD and cooperatives ministry is now the regulatory authority of the local government institutions.

On November 13, the seven-member committee chairman, AMM Shawkat Ali, now the health adviser, handed over the four-volume report to the chief adviser, Fakhruddin Ahmed, in his office with the draft local government ordinances in three volumes. There are 309 municipalities, 4498 union councils and 6 city corporations in the country.

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UPS TO GET INCREASED BLOCK ALLOCATIONS UNDER LGSP

Country's 4,498 union parishads (UPs) would be brought under Local Governance Support Project (LGSP) by the year 2011. The UPs under this project would get increased block allocation of funds than the normal block allocation, Local Government Division sources told BSS.

The UPs should attain skill and comply with some conditions of development, transparency and internal accounts for being included under the LGSP, the sources said adding, the project is operated with joint financial support of the Government of Bangladesh and the World Bank.

Direct block allocation for the UPs started in 2004 to help strengthen the local government institutions and LGSP was initiated in 2006 to raise block allocation for these institutions ensuring responsible utilisation of the funds and transparency to the people, the sources said.

The block allocation for the UPs in the current Annual Development Programme (ADP) is earmarked at over Tk 2.0 billion and through upazila administration, each UP getting an average allocation of about Tk 0.45 million.

But, the block allocation for the UPs under LGSP would rise manifolds considering the population and skill, the sources said adding that the UPs would get the allocated funds directly through banks instead of upazila administration. The UPs under LGSP would

undertake projects on priority basis as per the opinion of the local people, as the peoples' views would be given importance in this project.

There is the provision of forming two separate committees for implementing and monitoring the projects and besides this there would be a committee at upazila and national level for coordinating, implementing and monitoring the projects.

For maintaining their position, the UPs should every year attain no objection audit certification on maintaining accountability, administrative activities, financial, social, purchase and environmental issues.

The Local Government Division (LGD) is conducting audit of the UPs every year and any UP fails to comply with the conditions would be excluded from the LGSP, the sources said. The UPs under LGSP would also get assistance for skill development trainings and other administrative assistance.

Meanwhile, Local Government, Rural Development, Labour and Employment and Textiles and Jute Adviser Md Anwarul Iqbal told the news agency that LGSP would help bring dynamism, accountability and ensure peoples' participation in the local government through the LGSP.

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BLOCK ALLOCATION FOR UPS

Local government bodies in the country so far used internal resources for providing services to the people and for increasing facilities like roads, water supply and setting up of educational institutions. The chairman and members of an Union Parishad usually interact with the people and note their grievances and demands, before taking substantive measures. The safety of life and living, peace and discipline in rural areas are also the major responsibility of these local government bodies. 'Chowkidars' are appointed by Union Parishads for preventing thefts, dacoities and

pilferage of assets of people and rural institutions. The need for upgrading the local government bodies is quite pronounced and the major need is to augment the availability of fund for development activities.

The number of Union Parishads in the country is four thousand four hundred and ninety-eight. These bodies are run by elected representatives of the people. The tenure of the elected members is five years. The elected members and chairmen adopt their annual budget and use resources for investing in different projects. But the fixation of rates by

the Union Parishads and their collection remain quite ineffective. That being so, members of the Union Parishads look for allocations and grants from the national treasury. The reported increase in block allocations under the Local Government Support Project initiated in 2004 may enable the Union Parishads to meet the ever increasing demand of local people. Under the provisions of the LGSP, an average allocation of four and a half lakh Taka will be provided to each Union Parishad. For this two hundred crore of Taka has been allocated under the current budget. This block allocation may be used by the Union Parishads for meeting demands of the people for schools, medicare centres and physical facilities like roads and culverts.

The mode of transferring the fund has also been changed. Instead of processing the allocated fund through the official channels of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural

Development and Cooperatives, it would be transferred to nearest bank branches. The chairmen of the Union Parishads may collect the allocated fund from the banks. The mode transfer of the allocated fund has thus been made simple. The use of the fund should be optimised by the Union Parishads. The geographical boundaries of the unions have been fixed in the past century. The sizes of population in the unions have increased and thus also the demand for more effective social service. Thus, the structure, power and functions of local government bodies like the Union Parishads, the Upazila Parishads and the District Councils plus municipalities have to be upgraded. The local government bodies must be made development-oriented and pro-people. The latest higher block allocation is expected to help the process.

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