

BANGLADESH UPDATE



932
New cases in 24hrs



5,10,080
Total cases



7,479
Deaths



4,53,318
Recoveries



1,777,440
Deaths



81,426,681
Total cases

Scattered violence, irregularities mar municipality polls

STAR REPORT

The municipal polls yesterday were marked by scattered incidents, including technical faults in Electronic Voting Machines, irregularities and an alleged assault on a journalist.

Voters expressed mixed reactions over the use of EVMs. Some found it difficult, while others said it was easier than ballot papers.

The Election Commission held votes in 24 municipalities yesterday as the first of four phases to stage elections amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Voting in some polling stations was halted due to technical faults in the machines.

In Dhaka's Dhamrai, voting at Ekush Jyoti Bidya Niketan Centre was halted for around three hours in the morning due to technical faults in the EVM, said voters.

"I have been waiting in the queue since around 8:00am. But I have not been able to cast my vote till now due to a technical fault in the EVM," said Nasrin Sultana, who was talking to our correspondent around 11:00am at the centre.

The polling station's Presiding Officer Shah Alam claimed that voting was halted for only around 20 minutes, but it did not have any impact because voting was continuing through other EVMs.

This correspondent found technical faults in EVMs in at least seven polling centres in Dhamrai municipality.

Meanwhile, a journalist was allegedly assaulted by a presiding officer while covering the municipality elections at Dhamrai Collegiate School centre.

The centre's Presiding Officer Azizul Haque allegedly snatched the mobile phone of Jahir Raihan, a staff reporter of Bangla daily Prothom Alo, and also attacked and verbally abused him, the journalist alleged.

Contacted, Azizul claimed that he snatched the mobile phone as the journalist was secretly taking pictures of secret voting booths, which he said was illegal. Jahir, however, said he was taking pictures of voting out in the open.

Meanwhile, BNP candidate Dewan Nazim Uddin Monju boycotted the elections alleging irregularities in voting, obstructing him from casting a vote, and harassment of his activists.

In Barishal's Bakerganj, young Chaiti Das cast her vote for the first time at Bakerganj Government Primary School.

"I feel that I am very lucky to have a chance to cast my first vote through an EVM. It appears very easy to me," she told The Daily Star after exiting the polling station.

Housewife Mitali Das, who cast her vote at Bakerganj Government College, said, "I was able to learn how to use EVMs in mock voting a few days ago, so I faced no trouble in casting my vote."

Meanwhile, BNP mayoral candidate SM Moniruzzaman alleged that his polling agents were driven out from around 10 centres.

In Chatmohar of Pabna, irregularities took place in some polling stations with polling officials playing a questionable role.

The Daily Star's Pabna correspondent visited Afratpara Government Primary School around 11:00am and found only polling agents of the boat symbol at

the centre. No agents of other mayoral candidates could be found there.

It was also noticed that Awami League candidate agents were entering the secret room with voters. As per law, only a voter is allowed to go there to cast a vote.

Asked about it, the agents said they were helping voters use EVMs.

Contacted, the centre's Presiding Officer Md Hasanuzzaman said he would look into the matter.

Allegations of similar irregularities were found in other polling stations.

Two mayoral candidates out of four boycotted the election within two hours of the start of voting, alleging corruption.

The municipal elections in Panchagarh was held with some stray incidents.

In Panchagarh, several unruly young people vandalised District Election Officer Md Alamgir's vehicle with sticks around 11:00am in front of the Panchagarh Collectorate Adarsha Shikha Niketan polling centre while he was returning after visiting the polling centre.

During the attack, a police constable, Rabul Islam, was also injured.

Besides, five motorcycles were vandalised at Nurun Ala Nur Madrasa Centre and at least 16 people were injured at Notunbosti Government Primary School as supporters of rival groups of councillor candidates clashed during the elections.

Of the injured, three were shifted to Rangpur Medical College Hospital as their condition deteriorated fast, police and hospital sources said.

In the election, there were three mayoral candidates, 37 general councillor candidates and 16 councillor candidates for the reserved seat for women.

Yesterday's elections were the first of four phases which the Election Commission had planned amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Along with candidates of two major political parties -- Awami League and BNP, some other parties, including Jatya Party and Islami Andolan Bangladesh, contested the elections.

Earlier, the EC urged voters to maintain health safety guidelines to avoid spreading of coronavirus. A few days before election day, the EC had also arranged mock voting and campaigns on EVMs in the electoral areas.

There are 6.25 lakh voters in the 24 municipalities. However, the turnout could not be known immediately.

A total of 93 mayoral aspirants contested the 24 posts, while 801 councillor candidates contested 216 posts and 266 candidates for 272 women's reserved seats, as per the EC.

According to the local government division, there are 329 municipalities in the country. The EC will hold elections in 224 municipalities. Tenures of these municipalities will expire by March 2021.

A total of 62 municipalities will go to polls in the second phase on January 15 and the third phase will see elections in 64 municipalities on January 30. The fourth phase is likely to be held in mid-February.

[Our correspondents from Savar, Barishal, Pabna and Panchagarh contributed to this report]



A differently-abled man gives his fingerprints so that he could vote via electronic voting machines at Bakerganj municipality of Barishal yesterday.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

Govt retreated from stance, zealots didn't

FROM PAGE 1

Menon: The government has achieved outstanding success in accelerating the country's infrastructural growth and economic development. Bangladesh has graduated to a developing country from being a least developed country. Per capita income has increased.

A stable political situation is also prevailing, although politics has been polarised by two parties. Along with these developments, measures were supposed to be taken to curb corruption and stop criminalisation of politics, which was a commitment of the 14-party alliance. But corruption has increased.

It has spread in every level of society despite the government's zero-tolerance policy that saw some mid-level corrupt persons arrested. Criminalisation of politics is still prevailing. Still, the level of corruption is lower than those of the past autocratic governments and the BNP-Jamaat era.

DS: You said the country's political situation is stable, but there is a question whether political activities exist in the country at all. Opposition parties are barred from holding political programmes and speaking freely. There are also questions over killings and abductions.

Menon: There are allegations of opposition parties being barred from holding political programmes. We had waged movements in much more adverse situations in the past. We fought against Pakistani ruler Ayub Khan, fought for one and a half decade (against autocratic rulers) post 1975.

During the BNP-Jamaat era many people died and many others were injured in Operation Clean Heart. But none could stop us from waging a movement, driven by a democratic spirit. So, saying that democracy is absent and doing nothing don't make sense.

DS: Hefajat-e-Islam is active in politics again. It opposed the construction of Bangabandhu's sculpture and even said they would throw the sculpture in the Buriganga river. Awami League leaders and ministers reacted saying sculptures and statues are not the same. What's your take on this situation?

Menon: This is not an isolated issue; it is a political issue. It aims to establish Bangladesh as a fundamentalist and communal state. In a recent press conference, Mamunul Haque of Hefajat

said they respect Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, but not his sculpture. He even said, "Once we get the morale and organisational strength, we will dismantle all sculptures and throw them into the river".

While referring to "Shikha Chiron-ton" inside the cantonment, Mamunul's father, late Azizul Haque, in 1997 said, "Military persons guard the cantonment with firearms. If we want to go there, we will have to be prepared for a battle and we are preparing for it."

His interview was published in 1997 in the weekly Bichitra, in which he even admitted that he was against the Liberation War in 1971, saying, "Neutrally, our stance was against the Liberation War in 1971."

So, there is a continuity in the words of the father and son.

Hefajat leader Babunagari said the government will have to entertain their conditions, if it wants to stay in power. They demanded the cancellation of women policy and education policy. They don't want anyone to speak against them, and they will declare anyone an atheist whenever they wish.

They created similar noises against a Lalon sculpture and another sculpture on the Supreme Court premises. Then, the government compromised with them.

DS: You were a minister at the time... **Menon:** I said at the time that it was a moral defeat for us. The prime minister scolded both me and Hasanul Haque Inu for our remarks. She asked how we could say this, being ministers. She also said we could say so only after resigning (as ministers).

Fundamentalists like Azizul, Babunagari and Mamunul never retreated from their stance. It is the government that has retreated time and again.

DS: Some ministers and ruling party politicians are saying that statues and sculptures are not the same. How do you react to it?

Menon: In the last 14-party meeting on November 30, I said when Hefajat took to the field against war crimes trials in 2013, the prime minister adopted a strategy. But when a strategy overshadows core principles, it invites trouble.

When allegations of demeaning religion were raised against Bangabandhu, standing in the parliament he unequivocally said no one will be allowed to do politics using

religion. But we are compromising every step of the way in the "Mujib Year". Nothing appears coincidental to me. When Bangabandhu's speech was played in parliament, the part where he talked about secularism was dropped. But none took responsibility for that.

In the 14-party meeting, I said a fresh effort was being made for the emergence of a new religion-based politics.

DS: Is the 14-party alliance still active?

Menon: The 14-party alliance was formed amid a movement, but its activities have dwindled after the [2008] election. Recently, the alliance's activities have become limited. It was once said that the government was a 14-party government, but now it is an Awami League government. I raised the issue in a recent meeting.

DS: Considering your ideological position and ethics, did you ever feel that those values were compromised by the way you were elected as a lawmaker in the 2014 and 2018 elections?

Menon: Definitely. I spoke about this issue in parliament... I said people have lost interest in elections. Not only that, I have also said people have expressed their dissatisfaction over their voting right. I even said people did not accept the election. I was criticised for this remark.

But it is a matter of regret that a negative perception has been created in the public minds over the elections. We have gone far from the point for which we fought during the Pakistan era and after independence.

DS: Ensuring the rights to vote and the right to rice was the slogan of your alliance. But people's right to vote have been curbed and allegations of rigging are widespread...

Menon: Such a situation prevails when there is no protest or movement. We have seen Ayub Khan happily complete his first term. It was also the case with Ershad's regime in '86 and '88 elections. But movements were waged against them.

Mere words will not help restore people's right to vote. Struggle and movement are needed.

I believe democracy is endangered without voting right.

DS: Is the Awami League following the election models of Ayub, Ershad and Ziaur Rahman?

Menon: Let me share my experience of the last election in 2018. An influential BNP leader was my opponent. But I did

Thailand records 3,000 foreign tourists in Nov as ban eases

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand recorded 3,065 foreign tourists in November, official data showed yesterday, in its second month of receiving long-stay visitors after a ban was imposed in April to keep coronavirus infections under control.

The 3,065 foreign tourists in November is just a fraction of the 3.39 million arrivals in the same period last year. In October, there were 1,201 foreign visitors.

Though the country is gradually opening up to foreign visitors and offering incentives to boost domestic travel, efforts to revive its tourism-driven economy are being hampered by an outbreak found 10 days ago that has since infected more than 1,600 people in 43 provinces.

not find him in any electoral campaign. Nor did I find him or any of his men in the polling booths. It was clear that the election would not be fair.

DS: Assuming the BNP or the opposition party did not play its role, do you think it is acceptable that votes can be cast the night before the election?

Menon: I don't accept that. I have said in parliament that in such situations, when the state mechanism becomes over-enthusiastic, it drives the whole system towards destruction. Think of the Election Commission. They are sleeping. You might argue that this is how the EC is formed. The EC has been formed in the same way by previous governments. The election is destined to be criticised if the EC does not act.

DS: You have accepted the activities of the EC when you became an MP. There are allegations that you hardly talked about this issue while you were a minister. What is your response?

Menon: I spoke on this issue when I was minister. I even spoke about it in the parliament after the 2018 election. I also spoke when I went to the EC. My lone voice will not help. We need all the democratic, social and intellectual forces to unite and overcome this situation.

DS: A health ministry official issued a circular asking Muslim women employees to wear hijab and to make sure their clothes cover their ankle joints. Do you think the action of that official has anything to do with your attitude of compromise with Hefajat?

Menon: Not us, but the government has compromised with Hifajat.

DS: There were allegations that what you avoided saying as a minister the things you said when you were not a minister. Some are even saying that if you are offered the post of a minister, you will stop saying what you are saying now...

Menon: Let me tell you again, when I was a minister I spoke on issues like oil, gas and ports in the parliament. It disappointed the prime minister. I made amendments to uphold labour rights. I was offered the post of a minister in 2013, but I did not accept it. There was a lot of controversy that put me in an embarrassing situation. At the end of 2013, when arson attacks started, I became a minister. Now our party stance is clear. We have not only decided against taking ministry posts, but also decided to go independently with an election symbol.

1,776 more

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go to Bhashan Char and they are including their names in the list to move there.

The first batch -- of 1,642 Rohingyas -- was relocated to the island on December 4.

Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner is coordinating the relocation process amid concerns of the international community about the island being a risky place for the refugees.

Rohingyas of the first batch expressed their satisfaction and said they chose to move to the facilities -- being built under a Tk 3,100-crore housing project by the Bangladesh Navy -- for safety and comfort.

They added that not only were the living conditions poor in their makeshift homes in the Cox's Bazar

camp, fighting between rival gangs had made their lives even more difficult.

They believe they can live a better life on the char with greater access to healthcare, education and work.

Compared to the cramped conditions in the camps, the housing project is a better option, they said.

In the camps, a family of six-eight members would have to live together within a 400-square-foot space.

The UN and other development partners, however, expressed concerns and demanded independent assessments of the housing project before relocation began. A UN team has still not been allowed to visit the island.

The UN and rights groups have been questioning the relocation plan, saying the island was prone to floods and could be submerged during high tides.

India starts 2-day dry run

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first phase when it rolls out a vaccine for coronavirus.

A total of 2,360 training sessions have been held so far, and 7,000 officials have been trained, including medical officers and vaccinators.

In Andhra Pradesh, the dry run that will take place in Krishna district is aimed at testing the planned operations and the laid-out mechanisms in the state. Health Commissioner Katamaneni Bhaskar told reporters on Sunday.

"It will provide insights into any gaps or bottlenecks so that those could be addressed before the commencement of the actual drive," he was quoted as saying by news agency PTI.

Across the four states, five sessions will be held at identified locations with 25 test pre-identified beneficiaries - healthcare workers - for each session.

Feasibility of Co-WIN, an electronic application that identifies beneficiaries, and prerequisites for vaccine introduction as per operational guidelines will be assessed.

AEFI (Adverse Event Following Immunisation) panels will be formed and treatment centres will also be

identified if the vaccine triggers an adverse response in any of the beneficiaries.

"After the dry run, we will prepare a report for the State Task Force, which will review the feedback and guide us on further actions," Bhaskar said. The report will also be submitted to the Union Health Ministry, the commissioner said.

In Assam, the health department will roll out the dry run in two districts - Sonitpur and Nalbari. The end-to-end testing of the Covid-19 vaccination process includes vaccine and logistics mobilization to the sites in the two districts, as per officials.

Earlier this month, Bharat Biotech, Serum Institute of India (SII) and Pfizer had applied to the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI), seeking emergency use authorisation for their Covid-19 vaccines.

India has logged over 1.02 crore coronavirus cases so far, the second highest in the world after the United States. Over 1.47 lakh people have died after contracting the virus, one of the most infectious the world has seen in decades.

UGC for uniform admission system

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"Once it is introduced, we will know which subjects have high demand among the students..." he added.

In its report, the UGC has mentioned that the government may prepare a guideline on uniform admission test for private universities.

Asked, a top official of the education ministry said they would consider the matter after the UGC discusses it with private universities.

Contacted, Sheikh Kabir Hossain, chairman of the Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh (APUB), said they haven't yet discussed the issue of uniform admission test.

"We will hold meetings and give opinion about it."

"I think uniform admission system will be good for private universities. Students will benefit from it," he said.

North South University Vice Chancellor Prof Atiqul Islam said they haven't yet thought about uniform admission test.

He said they will think about it since the UGC has made recommendations in this regard.

The UGC recommendations come about a month after 19 public universities announced that they would hold uniform admission test.

At a meeting on December 19, the VCs of the universities decided that under the new system, there will be three exams -- one each for science, humanities and business studies students -- based on Higher Secondary Certificate exams syllabus.

Dhaka University, Rajshahi University, Jahangirnagar University and Chattogram University decided

not to follow the new system.

The new method of admission has been in discussion since 2010. It is aimed at relieving admission seekers of the hassles of travelling to different universities in various parts of the country just to be able to sit for the tests every admission season.

On January 23 this year, the UGC announced that universities would hold a uniform admission test in the 2020-2021 academic year.

UGC Member Alamgir said seven agricultural universities and three of the four engineering universities in the country will form two more separate clusters of universities.

The three engineering universities are Chattogram University of Engineering and Technology, Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology and Khulna University of Engineering and Technology.

Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) is now showing interest in joining this cluster, the official mentioned.

PVT UNIVERSITIES

The government has so far approved 105 private universities across the country. Of those, 97 are carrying out academic activities. Now, they enrol students through separate admission tests.

"Private universities enrol more than one lakh students a year, and the total number of students is around four lakh," said APUB Chairman Kabir Hossain.

They enrol students in three semesters -- spring (January to April), summer (May to August) and fall (September to December). And almost

half of the students get enrolled in the spring semester which starts after the publication of HSC results.

About 25 percent of the students get enrolled in the summer semester and the rest in the fall semester, according to insiders at private universities.

The minimum requirement set by the UGC for admission to a private university is GPA 2.5, in both the SSC or HSC, or a total of 6 grade points.

"But many private universities do not take any admission test. They sometimes enrol students flouting the minimum requirement set by the UGC," said a top UGC official on condition of anonymity.

Asked, Alamgir said these issues will be resolved once the uniform admission system is introduced. The modalities and other aspects of the new system will be sorted out through discussions with the private universities.

OTHER UGC RECOMMENDATIONS
The UGC recommended that the universities increase their research budgets.

It suggested establishing Central Research Laboratory and National Research Council with government funds. It also recommended setting up University Teachers Training Academy for creating qualified teachers.

The regulatory body also called for revising the Private University Act, 2010, under which the private universities run, to make it up-to-date.

It also proposed scrapping the evening, weekend and other executive courses at public and private universities, terming them certificate-oriented.

Saudi flights

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The General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA) of that country made the fresh announcement amid reports of detection of a new mutated strain of the novel coronavirus in the UK.

In an urgent circular, GACA said foreign airlines are permitted to carry non-Saudi passengers out of the kingdom, taking precautionary measures to prevent the spread of Covid. But they must not allow their crew to leave aircraft.

Earlier on December 21, Saudia, the national flag carrier of the kingdom, suspended all international flights including the ones to and from Dhaka, creating fresh uncertainty over the return of Bangladeshi workers to their workplaces there.

Following the Saudi authorities' decision, Biman Bangladesh Airlines also suspended its flights to and from Jeddah, Riyadh and Dammam that day.

Prior to the suspension, Biman operated seven flights and Saudia 10 flights a week from Dhaka to the kingdom.

Around 55,000 Saudi-bound Bangladeshi workers remained stranded for over six months since March when air travel between the two countries was suspended due to the pandemic.

Almost all of them managed to fly back to the kingdom after resumption of air travel in August, a Saudia official told this newspaper, seeking anonymity.

The fresh suspension of flights might again create uncertainty over the return of over 5,000 Bangladeshi workers to Saudi Arabia, added the official.