

14 dummy candidates work for 2 main rivals

RAFIQ HASAN and SHAMEEM MAHMUD, Ctg

Two-thirds or 14 of the 21 mayoral candidates in the May 9 Chittagong City Corporation polls are only dummies set up to work in favour of the two prime contestants, ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury and Mir Mohammad Nasir Uddin, sources said.

Most of the dummy candidates are independent, with a few representing obscure social organisations. There is no campaigning and hardly any election camp, poster, banner or other sorts of canvassing in their favour in the port city. Some of them even move around with the principal mayoral candidates on campaigning.

According to sources, both the Awami League-backed Nagorik Committee candidate Mohiuddin, the incumbent CCC mayor, and the ruling four-party alliance candidate Mir Nasir arranged the dummies as

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All eyes on CCC polls

Campaign gets momentum as heavyweights rush to port city

STAR REPORT

All eyes are set on May 9 Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) polls as the ruling four-party alliance and mainstream opposition parties have put in their full strength to ensure victory for their candidates.

Top leaders, ministers and lawmakers of both the camps are now in the port city for a hectic campaign for the high-profile election seen as an acid test for the ruling coalition in its penultimate year in power.

The opposition parties have paused their antigovernment movement to concentrate fully on the CCC polls which is the most significant battle between the ruling alliance and the opposition after the October 2001 general elections.

ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury, the incumbent mayor, is contesting the polls as the candidate of opposition-backed Nagorik Committee. Mir Mohammad Nasir Uddin, state minister for civil aviation and tourism, is his main challenger.

The Election Commission (EC) has taken a tough stance on this election, the last to be under Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) MA Syed, who will retire on May 22.

The government on May 2 removed Chittagong Metropolitan Police Commissioner Amjad Hossain after the EC in a ruling asked for his withdrawal saying he had failed to perform his duty impartially.

Two days later, the EC directed the divisional commissioner of Chittagong to refrain from activities beyond his jurisdiction after he held a high-level meeting on May 2 and took some vital decisions related to CCC polls.

Both the government and opposition sides have planned to engage their lawmakers to keep vigil on 41 wards of CCC on the polls day, as it has become a prestige issue for both and the last showdown before the next parliamentary election.

Directed by the EC, the local administration has designed tight security for the polls to ensure free, fair and peaceful voting. The administration has identified 557 out of 577 polling centres as vulnerable.

About 20,000 law enforcers including six platoons of army personnel will be deployed in the city to maintain law and order. A number of mobile courts and over 600 magistrates will be on duty on the polls day.

A good number of international and national observers will observe the polls against the backdrop of a ruptured credibility in Dhaka-10 by-election.

Political observers say the degree of fairness of the CCC polls would dictate the terms for the opposition parties' participation in the next general elections, as they have already voiced urgency for reforming the caretaker government system.

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2 'criminals' killed in 'crossfire'

STAR REPORT

Two alleged criminals were killed in 'crossfire' during encounters of the gangmen with the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and police in Barisal and Narail yesterday.

Hassan Fakir alias Ripon, 31, regional leader of Zia group of outlawed Sarbaharas, died in 'crossfire' in Gournadi in Barisal, reports our Barisal correspondent.

The Rab said they arrested Ripon from the house of Jewel Khalifa in Alekanda Nuria School area in the city on Wednesday.

A team of the elite force took Ripon to Adhuna and Ghanteswar areas in Gournadi in a bid to seize firearms and nab his associates, said the Rab.

The team came under fire and immediately countered the attack, during which Ripon was bullet-hit and killed on the spot at around 3:30am, the Rab claimed.

Sergeant Saiful Islam and constable Golam Rabbani suffered injuries in the attack. The Rab seized a pistol with two bullets from the scene.

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TRADE LIBERALISATION Diesel price hike to harm agriculture

Says CPD dialogue; emphasises more policy support

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Any hike in diesel price will be a dour setback for the country's agricultural sector, which faces a fierce competition in the present-day liberalised trade regime, said speakers at a city dialogue yesterday.

Rather, more incentives should be offered to the sector, they said, as the cropping pattern in the country has radically changed over the last two decades due to gradually widened agricultural trade liberalisation.

They were also of the opinion that the country should put more emphasis on research and extension services, and scale up domestic support in seed supply, irrigation and food processing to improve the market competitiveness of its agroproducts.

The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), an independent think-tank organised the dialogue on 'Impact of Agricultural Trade Liberalisation on Cropping Patterns in Bangladesh' at the Cirdap auditorium. CPD Senior Research Fellow Dr Uttam Kumar Dey presented the keynote paper.

Deliberating on the keynote, CPD Executive Director Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya said the recent price hike in diesel has pushed up the production cost and therefore the market price of rice. So, if the diesel price is increased any further, it will hurt the farmers real bad.

"Instead of raising the price," Bhattacharya said, "the government should rationalise the tariff on diesel."

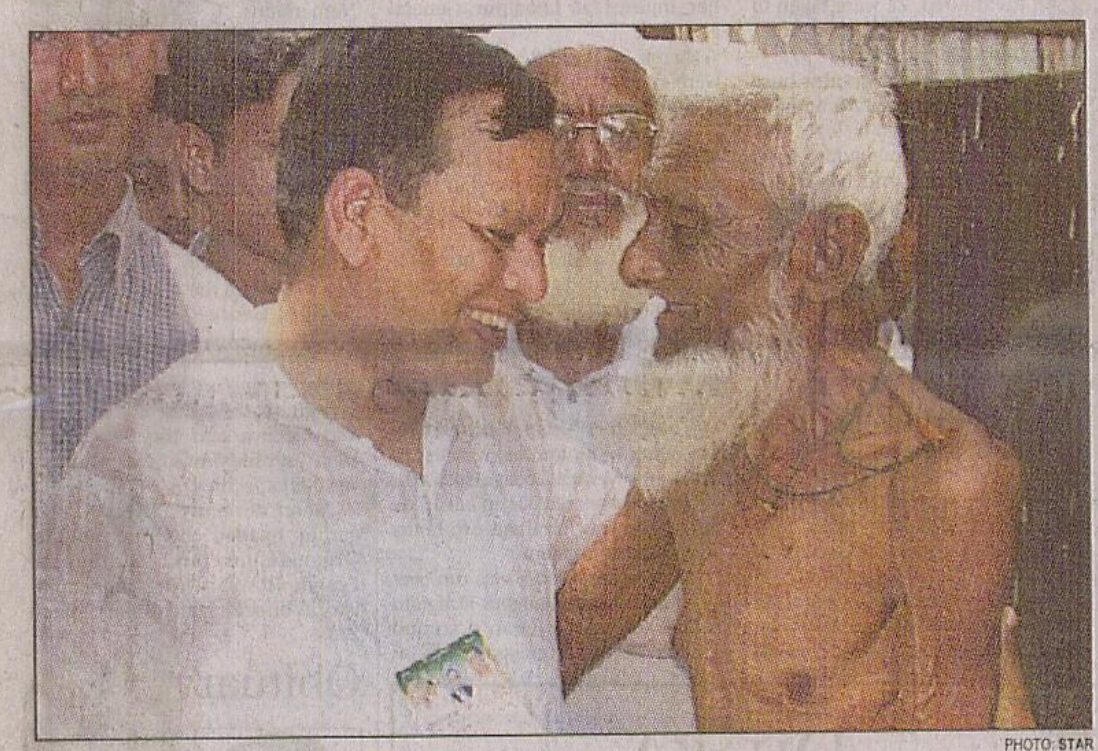
The CPD ED said the agricultural sector needs modernisation and greater policy support if we are to sustain its success.

"Due to trade liberalisation, production of some crops like Boro, potato and vegetables that enjoy more comparative advantages has increased, while cultivation of the crops like wheat, sugarcane, Aush and oilseeds that lack such advantage has come down," he explained.

He regretted that the government could not extend any significant policy support to the crops having comparative advantages, adding the time has come to take a precise decision about sugarcane cultivation as it has much market potential.

The chief guest of the event, State Minister for Agriculture Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, said, "It's true that trade liberalisation has benefited us in case of agricultural

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Ruling coalition-backed mayoral hopeful Mir Mohammad Nasir Uddin woos an elderly man for vote for the May 9 Chittagong City Corporation election during a public relations campaign at Nalopara yesterday.

Religious minorities under pressure

RAFIQ HASAN and SHAMEEM MAHMUD, Ctg

Religious minorities are allegedly facing threats and intimidation by the ruling four-party alliance men ahead of the May 9 Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) polls.

Polls campaigners for the BNP-led alliance's mayoral candidate are asking voters in the minority-dominated areas not to turn up at polling centres on the voting day, minority people alleged.

The alliance's target is to keep over one lakh and fifty thousand minority voters (mostly Hindus, making about 15 percent of total voters) away from polling centres as they are generally considered vote bank of the main opposition Awami League (AL), many of them pointed out.

During visits to a number of minority-dominated localities it was found that alliance loyalists have caused mental pressure on minority voters saying there will be violence on the polls day.

"Their strategy is to keep Hindu voters, mainly females, off the polling centres and cast fake votes in their names," an elderly voter said. Many others echoed him.

Leaders of Bangladesh Hindu-Buddha-Christian Unity Council have already demanded that the authorities deploy army and Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) three days before and as many days as needed after the polls in the minority-dominated areas.

There has been no move as yet for such deployment.

Alliance leaders and the administration have denied intimidation and threat to minority voters, and said no-one has created any pressure on them for not casting votes.

"The upcoming polls have not created any enthusiasm among the

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Gono Forum President Dr Kamal Hossain embraces opposition Awami League-backed runner for Chittagong mayor's office ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury as he seeks vote for him while Awami League stalwarts look on at an election rally at Laldighi Maidan in the port city yesterday.

Quayum finally appointed IGP

Major reshuffle in police

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has finally appointed Special Branch (SB) chief Abdul Quayum as Inspector General of Police (IGP).

Quayum will replace Mohammad Hadis Uddin who has been transferred to establishment ministry for a suitable posting, a government order said yesterday.

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Tk 30 lakh of Islami Bank robbed in Ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Muggers looted Tk 30 lakh from a bank at the posh commercial area of Agrabad in the port city in broad daylight yesterday.

Police and witnesses said three staff of the Agrabad branch of Islami Bank Bangladesh Limited were bringing the money by private car from the Pahartali branch of the bank at the Olaner crossing area around 11:00am.

The bank staff, including an officer, came under attack by armed assailants when the private car came to Agrabad Sheikh Mujib Road between the Choumahani and Batamtali intersections.

Around 10 armed muggers onboard two CNG-run autorikshaws intercepted the private car, said the bank staff.

The muggers snatched away the rifle from the bank security guard and took away the money in a sack kept in the bonnet of the car, they said.

The muggers returned the rifle before they fled the scene, immediately riding the same autorikshaws, they added.

Meanwhile, the fact that the muggers returned the rifle to the security guard, and that the security guard remained inactive throughout the incident despite having the

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2 killed in air force officers' mess wall collapse

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A boundary wall of the Air Force Officers' Mess caved in on passers-by yesterday, killing two persons including a woman and hurting two others at Shaheenbagh in Tejgaon in the city.

Ali Akbar, 55, a rickshaw garage worker, and Saleha Begum, 48, a house help, were buried alive under the debris of the heavy brick wall.

Air force officials took the bodies to Dhaka Medical College and Hospital, about 50 minutes after the incident, where doctors confirmed their deaths.

"Hearing a bang, I rushed to the

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RUPALI BANK PRIVATISATION Govt to take care of axed staff, Tk 900cr bad loan

Int'l tender floats by next week

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government will take responsibility of all Rupali Bank employees who might be axed in the process of its privatisation as well as its Tk 900 crore bad loan, the Privatisation Commission (PC) decided yesterday.

A meeting presided over by PC Chairman Enam Ahmed Chowdhury also decided that the preliminary information memorandum (PIM) on privatisation of the nationalised commercial bank would be published next week to attract strategic investors from the private sector.

"The government will take responsibility of the employees who might lose their jobs," Chowdhury told reporters after the meeting.

The new private management will be completely free in restructuring its staff, but it does not mean it will do whatever it wants,

Chowdhury said responding to a query on possible job cuts of the bank's officials and employees.

He said, to protect the employees' interests, the government will retain a large stake in the bank.

Around 68 percent of the bank's shares will be offloaded onto private sector, with the government retaining 26 percent shares, and 6 percent shares have already been sold out to public.

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6 Bangladeshi listed criminals held in India

UNB, Jessore

Six most wanted criminals of Bangladesh and two of India were arrested at a hotel at Bongaon in the Indian state of West Bengal early yesterday during a joint operation by the BSF and police.

They were arrested with women at Bongaon Matri Mandir Hotel, police sources said.

The arrested Bangladeshi criminals are Nabi Hossain alias Nabi of Mohammadpur, Shaheed alias 'Daka' Shaheed of Sutrapur, Selim

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BMA polls end amid claims of false votes

Patients suffer heavily in absence of doctors

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Patients suffered heavily at hospitals across the country as Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA) went yesterday to election marked by allegations of false vote casting and influence by the civil surgeons in the districts.

Thousands of doctors thronged the BMA Bhaban that wore a festive look since early morning on Topkhana Road opposite the National Press Club. Traffic movement came almost to a standstill as the road in front of BMA Bhaban had been closed to traffic since Wednesday night.

Leaders of the Dr Rashid-e-Mahbub-Dr Iqbal Arslan Parishad alleged casting of false ballots at many centres across the country including at the BMA headquarters. The ballot ended at 5:00pm yesterday.

Counting was scheduled to start at 10:00 last night and election results would not be available before 12 midnight yesterday.

"This morning we caught red handed a number of voters who tried to cast false votes. In fact, we also have news about casting of someone else's vote which is quite unfortunate," Professor Rashid-e-

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BMA Bhaban owner held, remanded

Doctoring of court order on polls postponement alleged

COURT CORRESPONDENT

The owner of Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA) Bhaban, arrested on charge of tampering with a court order to postpone the BMA election, was placed on a two-day remand yesterday.

Police on Wednesday arrested Nazim Habibuzzaman from his Shantinagar house after BMA Secretary General Dr AZM Zahid Hossain filed a case.

Sub-inspector Abu Bakar, also investigation officer (IO) in the case, produced Nazim before the Court of Chief Metropolitan Magistrate.

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Millions vote to hand Blair third term

AFP, London

Millions of Britons voted yesterday in a general election widely expected to hand Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party an historic third successive victory, even though he has lost trust over the war in Iraq.

A smiling Blair, accompanied by his wife Cherie, cast a vote in his northern English constituency of Sedgefield, where he is being

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AL plans to form 2 units in Dhaka city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Awami League (AL) high-command has planned to divide the party's Dhaka City unit into two parts to strengthen organisational activities in the capital and get rid of feud between top leaders of the present committee.

The party policymakers are likely to discuss the issue at its central

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Bomb found at N'ganj Proshika office

OUR CORRESPONDENT, N'ganj

Police on Wednesday seized a bomb from a local office of Proshika in Bandar Upazila Shabi Masjid area.

The seizure has created panic among the Proshika staff.

Bandar police said they seized the bomb from the guest room of the office at around 11:00pm.

The bomb is now with the police, who are trying to find out who kept the bomb there and why.



DUCKING DUTY: Patients lie unattended at the Orthopaedic Ward of Dhaka Medical College and Hospital late yesterday morning, as doctors cared little about their duty and preferred to vote in the Bangladesh Medical Association election that ran through the day.