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Choose from Quran, Narayan
 Campaigns Jamaat candidate in Khulna

PINAKI ROY and QUAZI AMANULLAH from Khulna

In gross violation of the electoral code of conduct, supporters of Jamaat-e-Islami candidate Miah Golam Parwar of Khulna-5 constituency have apparently set an option to choose between "Quran and Narayan" in their campaigns against Awami League candidate Narayan Chandra Chanda.

Jamaat and BNP activists are also asking the voters that they must choose between "Bismillah or Narayan", said locals from Dumuria and Fultola.

"I've heard it. Jamaat activists are campaigning for Golam Parwar using religion. This is nothing new. They did the same last time," said Gazi Abdul Hadi, AL acting general secretary of Khulna.

SEE PAGE 15 COL 2

ANSAR-VDP Govt rejects ansar-VDP's curious bid to watch polls

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government on Saturday rejected a proposal for independent deployment of the ansar and Village Defence Party (VDP) on poll duties, as the idea contradicts the home ministry's circular on election security measures.

In the proposal submitted to the ministry on December 14, the ansar and VDP suggested that they should control five percent of the total poll centres, sources said.

But such deployment is unprecedented in the history of elections in the country as the two forces traditionally carry out election duties along with the police.

Home ministry sources said the two forces, which run under a unified command, SEE PAGE 15 COL 7

RANGPUR Feud doesn't matter for JP aspirants

PORIMOL PALMA and RAFIQUE SARKER

Jatiya Party's (JP) alliance with Awami League (AL) is to give all JP candidates in greater Rangpur a considerable edge in today's polls despite intra-alliance feud of the two parties in several constituencies.

The BNP-Jamaat government's "lack of attention" towards the people of this region is also likely to help AL and JP candidates, local political analysts say.

JP candidates are contesting in 18 constituencies in greater Rangpur. Of them, five SEE PAGE 15 COL 4

Prayer Timing
 December 29

	Azan	Jamaat
Fajr	5-30	6-05
Zohr	12-45	1-15
Asr	4-00	4-15
Maghrib	5-27	5-30
Esha	7-00	7-30

Source: Islamic Foundation

Israel warns of ground offensive

Jets keep on pounding Hamas targets in Gaza, death toll crosses 280

AFP, Gaza City

Israel warned yesterday it could send ground troops into Gaza as its warplanes continued pounding Hamas targets inside the enclave where more than 280 Palestinians have been killed in just 24 hours.

Hamas responded by firing rockets the deepest yet into Israel, with one hitting without causing casualties not far from Ashdod, home to Israel's second-largest port some 30 kilometres (18 miles) north of Gaza, medics said.

In the latest international call for an end to the violence, the United Nations Security Council after an emergency session urged an immediate halt to all military operations.

However Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak vowed to expand the mammoth bombing campaign, unleashed in retaliation for ongoing militant rocket fire.

"The IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) will expand and deepen its operations in Gaza as much as necessary," he told reporters before a cabinet meeting.

"We are ready for anything. If it's necessary to deploy ground forces to defend our citizens, we will do so," his spokesman quoted him as saying earlier.

Israeli television said the army had begun concentrating ground forces near the tiny Palestinian enclave, where medics said air raids have killed more than 280 people and wounded more than 600 since early on Saturday.

Warplanes continued to pound the impoverished and overcrowded territory of 1.5 million, with at least six people killed on Sunday as jets hit targets in northern Gaza, sending thick columns of smoke barrelling into the air.

"Israel launched a military operation yesterday in the Gaza Strip in order to regain a normal life for the citizens in the south who have suffered for many years from incessant rocket, mortar and terror attacks," Prime Minister SEE PAGE 15 COL 7



Escorted by policemen, election officials take transparent ballot boxes and other materials to a polling centre in the city. The photo was taken on English Road in Old Dhaka. PHOTO: STAR

Cellphones to stay alive during polls

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Mobile phone network will remain in operation during the polling hours across the country but it might be suspended in certain areas or even in the whole country instantly if any situation arises.

In a televised speech yesterday evening, Chief Election Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda said the decision was taken considering public demand and for successful completion of election activities.

But except the presiding officer, nobody can enter the polling station with mobile phone.

RESTRICTION
 Meanwhile, the Election Commission (EC) Secretariat has imposed a ban on certain vehicles from December 28 midnight to December 29 midnight.

SEE PAGE 15 COL 8

Over 300 migrants feared drowned near Andaman

Victims are mostly Bangladeshis, Indian coastguards say

INDEPENDENT TELEVISION NEWS ONLINE

Around 300 people are feared drowned after jumping from a boat and trying to swim ashore in the Bay of Bengal.

The Indian coast guard said 88 people, mostly Bangladeshi illegal migrants, had been rescued from a small boat near Little Andaman island which lies around 90km (55 miles) south of Port Blair - about 1,200km (750 miles) off India's east coast.

Another 11 men were found on nearby Sandy Point island.

S P Sharma, commander of the coast guard for the Andaman region, said: "Around 300 of them reportedly jumped into the sea hoping to swim across to the shore. While all of them are feared dead or missing, search operations are still ongoing."

A survivor told officials there had been there had been 412 men, aged between 18 and 60, on the boat, which had little food or water and only a plastic sheet for a sail.

Sharma said the man told police seven others had died at sea and their bodies were dumped overboard.

Preliminary investigations suggested the men had left Bangladesh bound for Malaysia in six motorised boats about 45 days ago. At some point on their journey, the men had changed vessels, a coast guard statement said.

SEE PAGE 15 COL 5

Campaign rings in a change

M ABUL KALAM AZAD

Although the intense desire of voters for honest and competent candidates remains largely unmet in this election, they are coming out of their homes to vote this morning at least with one positive impression about politics after witnessing over the last couple of weeks a welcome change in the country's culture of electioneering.

The campaigns, which started on December 12 with the lifting of emergency restrictions on processions and rallies, were very different in many aspects this year from traditional election campaigns the country is used to.

Due to the stringent new electoral code of conduct drawn by the Election Commission (EC), residents of cities, especially of the capital, SEE PAGE 15 COL 4

Election process, not results

Deputy chief of EU observers tells The Daily Star about team's focus

ARUN DEVNATH

In election observation, it is the process that matters. The outcome in terms of who wins or loses the election seems immaterial to observers.

"We are not here to manage or supervise the process. We are here to observe it, note it and report on it," says Graham Elson, deputy chief of the European Union (EU) Election Observation Mission, now in Bangladesh.

The Daily Star caught up with Elson, a man with the experience of observing elections in around 20 countries worldwide, in an exclusive interview to understand what it means to be an election observer.

"As I often say, for us what matters is the process. The outcome to us, in terms of who wins or loses, in a sense is immaterial," he says.

Election observation is a long, thorough process guided by a SEE PAGE 2 COL 1



Graham Elson

700 foreign observers to watch polls

STAR REPORT

As many as 700 foreign observers from different countries and international organisations and 74 foreign journalists will monitor today's parliamentary polls across the country, according to the data of Election Commission (EC).

Foreign observer teams include Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), European Union (EU), International Republican Institute (IRI), ANFREL-BD, EOJ, National Democratic Institute (NDI), EU Election Observation Mission, Commonwealth, Asia Pacific Democracy Partnership, Asia Foundation (SAARC), British High Commission, US Embassy, Japan, Indian High Commission, Swedish Embassy, Nepal, German Embassy and the USAID.

EU Election Observation Mission has sent the largest team with 181 members SEE PAGE 6 COL 1

Southwest waits for polls minus outlaws

PINAKI ROY from Khulna

It seems that the ninth parliamentary election is going to be held today in the southwest region without any influence of the extremists since they have been recently inactive in the area known as their den.

Talking to The Daily Star, different sections of people including law enforcers, journalists, political leaders and NGO activists said the election environment in their areas is similar to that across the country.

Many notorious extremist leaders were killed or fell in cross-fires in the past years and the relief of the voters in this election is palpable, they observed.

Extremist groups used to threaten voters, especially the religious minorities, in exchange for money and would also engage in fake voting and snatch ballot boxes to influence election results.

Such groups reportedly worked for a few BNP-Jamaat-

Mahela ton drives SL

SPORTS REPORTER

Captain Mahela Jayawardene struck an unbeaten century to put Sri Lanka in full command against Bangladesh on the third day of the first Test at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

The visitors moved to a 406-run lead after adding 291 for 4 in their second innings following Bangladesh's abysmal first innings showing of 178 all out. The teams will come back to the Test match tomorrow after today's rest day due to the general elections in the country.

Jayawardene rode out some anxious moments and survived a close run-out opportunity early in his innings to compile a most fulfilling century. The stylish right-hander struck fifteen boundaries and a straight six off Shakib Al Hasan in an innings that spanned five hours.

He reached his hundred off 177 balls and four balls later he SEE PAGE 15 COL 3

24 killed in Tangail truck crash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Twenty-four people including a father and his son were killed and 20 others injured in a truck accident on Jamuna Bridge approach road in Tangail Sadar upazila yesterday morning.

The truck loaded with iron rod and carrying the victims -- all day labourers -- skidded off the road in dense fog and fell into a ditch at Kandila around 9:00am.

Most of the 44 victims hail from Gaibandha, Sirajganj, Bogra, Rangpur and Tangail districts, and they were going back to their villages to cast vote in today's parliamentary election, sources and witnesses said.

Ashraf Hossain, officer-in-charge of Tangail Sadar Police Station, said the driver of the Bogra-bound truck from Chittagong lost control of the vehicle due to poor visibility as dense fog blanketed the area. The victims were sitting on the pile of iron rod in the truck.

Twenty-three of them died on the spot and one at hospital later, he told this correspondent.

Police, fire service men and local people rescued the injured and rushed them to Tangail General Hospital where one SEE PAGE 15 COL 3

Judicial magistrates resent EC decision

BNP wants them to be in field

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A delegation of the BNP-led four-party alliance yesterday requested the Election Commission (EC) to deploy judicial magistrates in the field level to effectively check violation of election code of conduct in today's parliamentary polls.

Meanwhile, a section of judicial magistrates commissioned to try electoral offences on the polling day yesterday expressed resentment over the EC's decision not to deploy them (magistrates) in the constituencies.

BNP Joint Secretary General Nazrul Islam Khan who led the delegation told reporters that they met Election Commissioner M Sakhawat Hossain and made the plea to employ judicial magistrates in the field level as was the tradition in all past elections.

He said, as judicial magistrates, as per EC's decision, would discharge their duties from their offices at district level, they would only be able to punish anyone once an allegation regarding violation of the election code of conduct is lodged with them. SEE PAGE 15 COL 3



The photo shows a few of the hermaphrodites in Malibagh in the capital who have become voters for the first time. However, they had to identify themselves as either male or female on papers as the state only recognises the two sexes. PHOTO: STAR

'Hijras' still deprived of franchise

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Ignored in every step of life, the society is blind towards a third variety of the sexes, the 'Hijra Community' (hermaphrodite or eunuch), deprived of their right to vote because of their distinctiveness.

Hijras are left with no choice and are bound to identify themselves as either male or female, to cast their vote. Bangladeshi law and related election documents, only recognise the dominant two sexes. This is the first time they SEE PAGE 6 COL 4

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Harijans upbeat

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

The Dalit community (Harijans), usually considered as untouchables by the society, is very optimistic about today's national elections, as for the first time in history some political parties have pledged to uphold their rights in election manifestoes.

Four political parties -- Bangladesh Awami League, Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal (Bashod) and Progressive Democratic Party SEE PAGE 6 COL 1