

Longing for a lively canal

KM REZAUL HAQUE, Gaibandha

Thousands of poor farmers and fishermen have seen their livelihood options dwindle due to the siltation of the Lenga Canal during dry season.

In the 1990s the 45-kilometre canal that connects the Ghaghat river to the Jamuna at Gaibandha sadar was a major irrigation water and fish cultivation resource. However, the canal has suffered from siltation in more recent years.

As a result during the monsoon months the canal overflows, with riverside crops inundated, while in winter months it remains dry, said Nasimuddin, secretary of the Lenga Canal Water Management Society.

"Until 2004, we used canal water to irrigate Boro, but with siltation our fate became bleak," said Rafiqul Mia, a farmer of Kashdaha village. He said alternative irrigation from deep tube wells cannot be managed while shallow tube wells often fail to draw water during Boro season.

Sudhir Chandra, a fisherman of village Ramjibon, said fishermen used to cultivate

fish throughout the year but now remain jobless during winter.

Agriculture officials said around 5000 acres of land could be cultivated during dry season had there been water in the canal during winter.

ATM Mahbub Alam, chairman of Dhopadanga union parishad, said at least 5,000 people could cultivate land or fish if the canal is excavated, with an embankment built on the both sides.

In 2000, the Local Government Engineering Department, LGED, partly excavated Lenga canal and installed two sluice gates to control water overflow during the monsoon and store water during winter.

Shamsul Arefin Khan, upazila engineer of LGED in Sunderganj, told The Daily Star authorities have approved Tk 1.5 lakh to excavate the canal from Dakhin Ramjibon to Nagar Katgora in Bamondana.

Nasimuddin said however, that this money is nothing compared to the need. "We want comprehensive planning for excavation and adequate funding," he said.



The Lenga Canal at Sundarganj in Gaibandha has become seriously narrow and shallow, leaving farmers, who depend on it for irrigation, worried. In the lean season, the 45km water body dries up. Experts say if there was water in the canal during winter, around 5,000 acres of land could be cultivated in the season.

PHOTO: STAR

Barisal

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Rebel Awami League candidate Mahmudul Haque Khan Mamun also alleged that his agents had been driven away by Hiron's men from some poll centres.

Hiron's close associate Baloram Poddar denied the allegations. He rather alleged that some presiding and assistant presiding officers had been favouring Kamal.

The Daily Star correspondents visited at least 50 BCC poll centres in 20 wards and talked to more than 150 agents of both Kamal and Hiron. They said voting was peaceful in their centres.

"So far the election was free and fair. We did not face

any problem," said Nobin Hossain Sajal, a polling agent of Kamal at Nuria High School centre in ward-12. More than 60 of Kamal's other agents also said the same.

Meanwhile, some untoward incidents took place in three to four polling centres.

In Rupatoli Government High School centre, AL supporters assaulted former BNP lawmaker of Barisal-4 constituency Abul Hossain, who is an outsider in BCC areas, and a few of his men in front of Hiron and Kamal around 1:40pm. The incident halted the voting there for more than an hour.

Voting also remained

suspended for more than an hour in Diapara Government Primary School centre due to vandalism at a booth by some AL men.

Witnesses said the AL activists snatched some ballot papers from the presiding officer, stamped those and put them into ballot boxes.

Law enforcers took control over the situation and detained Shahin Shikder, top leader of city Jubo League, in connection with the incident.

Voting resumed there at 5:00pm.

Earlier, around 10:30am, Sramik League leader Aftab

Hossain threatened journalists of dire consequences if any photograph of the beating of a local BNP leader at Chahotpur Primary School was published.

In another incident, activists of Chhatra League, pro-AL student body, assaulted two workers of Jubo Dal, pro-BNP youth organisation, at Kaunia Girls High School centre.

Hiron cast his vote at Nuria High School centre around 8:30am while Kamal at Barisal Polytechnic Institute centre around 9:10am. Both were looking confident about winning the poll.

Liton blasts 'advance' results on TVs

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

Ruling Awami League-backed mayoral hopeful AHM Khairuzzaman Liton last night blasted TV channels for airing polls results "in advance."

"The way television channels were broadcasting news in favour of Bulbul [BNP-backed candidate] was illegal. I reject the results [aired by TV channels]," Liton told a press conference at the party office at Laxmipur intersection in the city around 9:00pm.

He said he would accept the results only after the formal announcement from the Election Commission.

Several hundred leaders and activists of AL and its associate bodies brought out a procession chanting slogans in favour of Liton.

At one stage, Rab personnel charged batons to disperse the AL men.

EVM proved easy to use

STAR REPORT

The voters appreciated the small-scale use of electronic voting machines (EVM) in four city corporation elections yesterday as they found it very handy.

The Election Commission (EC) used EVMs at 13 polling centres under four wards in four city corporations -- Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal, and Sylhet -- where the number of voters was over 10,000 altogether.

Casting vote through EVMs was a matter of enjoyment to many, especially the younger ones, while some voters found it inconvenient.

"It's a new experience for me. It's also a hassle-free system," said a smiling Abu Taher after casting his vote at Roshomoy centre in Sylhet.

Laboni Das of Sepoypara in Rajshahi was more excited after exercising her franchise at TTC centre.

"It was very easy and swift. This system should be introduced in all elections," Laboni added.

Forty-eight-year-old Selina Khatun, who

cast her vote at the same centre, said, "It was just a matter of pressing some buttons. I found no difficulty as I took part in a mock voting a week before the polls."

Zahrool Islam, presiding officer of the centre, said voters were very enthusiastic about the use of EVMs.

"About 30 percent of total 2,418 votes were cast within first three hours," he said, adding that voting through EVMs was faster than the conventional voting system.

In Khulna, some voters however claimed that the orientation programme carried out by the EC to make the EVM system familiar to the voters was insufficient.

"We did not take part in mock voting. That is why, I faced some problems while voting through the new system," said Saherunnessa, a voter of Crescent Alim Madrasa centre in Khulna.

Mustafa Faruk, returning officer of Khulna, said voters had responded positively to the use of EVMs.

The system should be expanded, he added.

In Barisal, women speedily cast votes through EVMs, election observers noted.

Khulna

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after five years. So, I want to enjoy the day ...," he told The Daily Star at city's Iqbalnagar Secondary Girls High School polling centre.

It was a festival for the city. At dozens of voting centres, voters were seen standing in long queues. They cast their votes peacefully.

Casting their votes, three

mayoral candidates -- ruling alliance-backed Talukder Abdul Khaleque, opposition alliance-backed Moniruzzaman Mony and Jatiya Party-backed Shafiqul Islam Modhu -- told reporters that voting was going on peacefully and fairly.

However, after the polling was done, Mozibar Rahman, chief electoral agent for JP-backed Modhu, told The Daily Star that the administration was biased and that it took no action though supporters of two rival candidates were violating electoral code of conduct.

Meanwhile, the death of Shah Alam Sarder, 45, caused worry among some voters.

Alam, an employee of Crescent Jute Mills at city's Khalishpur, died around 11:30am following "law enforcers' action on a procession" brought out by activists of Islami Andolan Bangladesh at Crescent Jute

Mills area around 9:30am.

Activists of Islami Andolan Bangladesh claimed that Alam died due to police beating at People's Rail Gate area.

Wahiduzzaman, senior assistant superintendent of police, said, "None made such allegations against them." Police admitted to chasing the demonstrators away.

Alam's elder son Md Al Amin said, "After the police action my father returned home and said he was feeling sick. We took him to three hospitals."

First, he was taken to the healthcare department of the jute mill, where he was given painkillers for chest pain. He

was then rushed to Khalishpur Clinic and then to Gazi Medical College and Hospital.

Doctor Syed Taherul Islam of Khalishpur Clinic told The Daily Star, "I received him alive and found problems in his heart. I referred him to Gazi Medical College and Hospital. I think he might have died of cardiac arrest."

Gazi Mizanur Rahman, owner of Gazi Medical College and Hospital, said, "I received him dead."

Talking to reporters, BNP-backed mayor aspirant Moniruzzaman Mony blamed law enforcers for Alam's death.

Sylhet

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63, was pleased with the peaceful atmosphere at the polling centre. As she could not get upstairs, a policeman took her into the polling booth.

"Who knows it may be the last poll in my life. So I could not stay back at home," said Taslima, a resident of Dariapara.

Like the two, many females alongside male voters thronged the 127 polling centres in the city to exercise their franchise.

Long queues of voters snaked outside the polling booths as soon as polling opened at 8:00am. The number of voters decreased as the day progressed.

Kewapara resident Sharif

Hossain Khan cast his vote at Blue Bird School and College polling centre. He was pleased to see that there was no unnecessary gathering at the entrance to the polling centre.

Throughout the day, no untoward incident was reported from any part of the city. Police and Ansar men remained vigilant at the polling centres, while Rapid Action Battalion personnel were seen dispersing any crowd on streets.

Members of Border Guard Bangladesh patrolled several major roads. No motorised vehicles, except for some transport approved by the Election Commission, plied the city thoroughfares.

Talking to newsmen, both

the frontrunner mayor aspirants expressed confidence that they would win the mayoral race if the polls ended peacefully.

"I will win the election if it ends peacefully like the way it has begun," Awami League favourite Badar Uddin Ahmed Kamran said after casting his vote at Sylhet Govt Pilot Boys High School around 9:00am.

BNP backed candidate Ariful Haque Chowdhury expressed similar views to reporters at Raynagar Govt Primary School.

MUHIITH DENIES ALLEGATION
Finance Minister AMA Muhiith yesterday rejected the allegation that he has breached the electoral code

of conduct, reports UNB.

"On Friday, two MPs met me.... They aren't voters. Apart from them, I didn't meet anyone else. Those who are saying that I've violated the election laws are rubbish and bogus.

Kamran [Badar Uddin Ahmed] didn't go to my residence, for which you could say that the election laws might have been violated," he told newsmen after casting his vote at Durgakumar Pathshala polling centre in Sylhet.

The veteran minister reached there at noon by a rickshaw without any police protection.

He claimed that the polls were being held in a free and fair manner.

Pak militants kill 25

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Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar said the bus bomb killed 14 students and wounded 19.

"As casualties were being brought to the hospital terrorists had taken position inside the hospital building," he told reporters.

"They opened fire on administration and police officials who arrived at the

hospital. One suicide bomber blew himself up in the hospital."

Nisar said he was unable to give exact casualty figures for the hospital attack, but Abdul Wasey, spokesman for the paramilitary Frontier Corps earlier said 11 were killed and 17 wounded in the bombing.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a militant group officially banned

by the government in 2002, claimed responsibility for both attacks.

The bus targeted in yesterday's attack was from Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University, which is located close to a Shiite Hazara neighbourhood in Quetta, and many Hazaras are students.

Baluchistan, which borders Iran and Afghanistan, is rife with Islamist militancy

and a regional insurgency waged by separatists demanding political autonomy and a greater share of profits from the region's natural resources

Overnight, separatist militants blew up a historic building in Baluchistan linked to Pakistan's founding father, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, razing its structure to the ground.

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