

Stuck, helpless in delinked city

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"We had planned a grand celebration but everything got ruined due to nasty politics. I just returned all the advance tickets," said one of them, Nasir Hossain, at Kamalapur station.

There were hundreds of thousands others in the capital and elsewhere feeling trapped and helpless, thanks to the country's politicians.

While the opposition called for a march to Dhaka, the ruling party was out to foil the programme.

Members of the Awami League, its associated bodies and law enforcement agencies

decided not to let any public transport enter the city. They even stopped private cars, auto-rickshaws and manually-driven rickshaws.

"I had an appointment at the hospital for treatment of my eyes two days back. But I could not make it because no one was being allowed into the city," said sexagenarian Hajera Begum, a resident of Sonargaon in Narayanganj.

She was shuffling through Kanchpur bridge holding her son around 12:30pm yesterday. She was trying to go to Madina Eye Hospital.

"Today I have to walk around 2 km and changed my vehicle four times to reach the hospital," Panting, the elderly woman said every step was causing her discomfort in her eyes.

In Ashulia and Abdullahpur, men, women, children and elderly persons were seen walking in their hundreds in long processions throughout the day.

Hajeerah Khatun, who along with her daughter and granddaughter was traveling to Jamaibazar in Ashulia, also had to leave the bus at Ashulia bazaar and walk along the highway.

"We may have to walk all the way to our destination," she fumed.

Gabtoli bus terminal, one of the busiest in Dhaka, was devoid of any activity yesterday.

"People can at least make an effort to maintain their daily lives during hartal and blockades if they have the courage to step out of the house. Now we are not even being allowed to do that," said Rana Ahmed.

A shopkeeper of Islampur, Rana was not allowed to cross over to the other side of Babubazar bridge yesterday. But he had to go to a courier outlet where a buyer had sent

him money.

In Chittagong, Dhaka-bound passengers were stranded yesterday as road and rail communications between Chittagong and the capital remained cut off yesterday.

Many people wandered from one counter to another looking for bus tickets while people returned from the railway station empty handed as train operations had also been suspended.

Standing hopelessly outside a bus counter at Station Road, Mamunur Rashid, a businessman, said he had gone to every bus counter in the city, but he could not manage a ticket to go to his home in Gazipur.



A JUBO Mohila League activist yesterday bangs the Supreme Court gate with a stick while another threatens to hurl a brick chunk at pro-opposition lawyers (out of frame), who were trying to bring out a procession. A pro-opposition lawyer, right, hurls a brick chunk at the JUBO Mohila League activists from the premises of the apex court. The two locked in a clash while the lawyers were trying to bring out a procession just when the pro-ruling party activists' procession was passing by.

PHOTO: STAR



Nonstop blockade

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They detained BNP MP Rasheda Begum Hira, former MP Halima Newaz and party Vice-chairperson Selima Rahman for two hours as they tried to enter Khaleda's house. The trio were released around 3:30pm upon furnishing bonds.

In the evening, law enforcers detained BNP Vice-chairman Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury, after he came out of Khaleda's house.

Mobin and two other BNP leaders -- Reaz Rahman and Sabihuddin Ahmed -- were present when Robert Gibson, the British high commissioner in Dhaka, met Khaleda at her house.

Shamsher was about to brief journalists in front of her residence about the meeting, when detectives picked him up.

After his detention, Reaz and Sabihuddin went back into Khaleda's house.

"Two plainclothes detective personnel caught me and put me on a jeep. I don't know where they're taking me," Mobin told The

Daily Star over the phone, immediately after his detention.

In protest at his detention, the opposition alliance called a daylong hartal in Sylhet and Sunamganj for tomorrow.

After the meeting with Khaleda, Gibson left the place without making any comment. He had been on leave and returned to Dhaka on Sunday.

Contacted for comments, a spokesperson for the UK high commission said: "Having returned to Dhaka, the high commissioner is meeting senior leaders of the two parties today and tomorrow to get an update on recent developments, including Khaleda Zia and the foreign minister earlier today."

As on the first day of the Dhaka march, activists of the ruling Awami League and its front bodies prowled some city streets yesterday and clashed with pro-opposition lawyers in the Supreme Court area.

A street vendor was hit by a rubber bullet

when police opened fire during a clash with BNP activists at Nawabpur in Old Dhaka. The victim, Yusuf Ali, was hit in the stomach, said Mukhter, sub-inspector of Wari Police Station.

Public transport was thin as on Sunday but private cars were seen in large numbers.

Launch services on the Dhaka-Barisal route, however, resumed in the evening while some Dhaka-bound trains left Rangpur. But train and bus services from Sylhet and Khulna to the capital remained suspended.

CLASH IN SC AREA

Pro-BNP and Jamaat lawyers clashed with activists of JUBO Mohila League, a pro-AL body, in the SC area for the second straight day. The two groups threw brick chips and stones at each other for about half an hour before the pro-opposition lawyers left.

No one was hurt in the clash that began around 11:30am.

The lawyers were demonstrating at the main gate of the SC in support of the "March for

Democracy". They were chanting slogans against Prime Minister and AL chief Sheikh Hasina.

Tension heightened when a JUBO Mohila League procession was crossing the area, chanting slogans against Khaleda.

At one stage, an activist of the JUBO Mohila League showed shoes to the agitating lawyers, prompting the lawyers to throw brickbats at the pro-AL activists.

Things aggravated when a group of stick-wielding AL activists joined in, chanting anti-BNP slogans.

The AL men tried to enter the SC premises to attack the lawyers, but police stopped them. From outside the gate, the ruling party activists threw brick chips at the lawyers.

The party activists staged agitation near the SC gate for half an hour after the pro-BNP lawyers left. They, however, left the place when some pro-AL lawyers brought out a procession against the 18-party march around 1:00pm.

On Sunday, AL activists attacked the pro-opposition lawyers, entering the SC premises where the lawyers were demonstrating. Five lawyers, including two female ones, were injured.

In September 2003, the then ruling BNP backed lawyers and its activists attacked the pro-AL lawyers in Dhaka Judges' Court area, injuring at least 50 pro-AL lawyers.

AJ Mohammad Ali, president of Supreme Court Bar Association, at a press briefing yesterday announced a work abstention at all courts across the country for today and demanded judicial investigation into Sunday's attack.

He alleged some terrorists with the help of police carried out the attack and urged the inspector general of police and the Dhaka metropolitan police commissioner to take action against the police personnel responsible for the incident within 40 hours.

The SCBA also condemned the chief justice for his "silence" on the matter.

Record pass rate in PSC

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was 88.44 percent.

The number of students securing GPA-5, the highest grade point average, also rose to 2,40,961 from last year's 2,30,220.

Officials and teachers attributed the success to the combined effort by all.

"Almost every guardian is now aware of the competitiveness of the exams and that is why they [guardians] gave their best to get their children a good result," Shyamal Kanti Ghosh, director general of Directorate of Primary Education (DPE), told The Daily Star yesterday.

"Teachers are now more accountable and they try to give their efforts on every child because stipends are allocated on the basis of results," he said.

The results, published yesterday, show 24,83,142 students -- 11,38,898 boys and 13,44,244 girls -- passed the examination. The number of failed students also came down

significantly.

The number of total examinees and number of schools with cent percent pass rate rose remarkably while the number of failed pupils and schools with zero pass rate came down significantly. A total of 35,890 flunked against last year's 65,778.

The pass rate of this year's Ebtedai (primary level of mass education) examinations is 95.80 percent.

Primary and Mass Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid formally announced the results at a press conference at his secretariat office around 1:00pm yesterday.

Students got their results from their own institutions, online and through mobile phone SMS.

"Compared to last year, we have done better in all indicators this year, which suggests an improvement. We introduced this public examination with a view to achieving equity at primary level and the results show that we are moving forward to that aim," he said.

The minister said the result of one centre in Amtoli upazila in Barguna was suspended as it was found inconsistent. The ministry is yet to receive results from Tripoli where three students sat for the exams.

This year, allegations of question paper leakage arose during the exam. The ministry formed a probe committee that found evidence of leakage of two subjects in four districts.

So, questions arose whether the leakage had any impact on getting such brilliant results.

Nahid, in his reply, denied such claim, saying it was a partial leakage in only few districts and it had not put any affect on the whole examination.

He rather said the average pass rate in English dropped this year from that of last year.

Asked whether the quality of education falls despite such a huge pass rate, the minister said, "We were accustomed to the fail as the rate of failed students was higher than that of passed in previous times."

"We are trying to improve the quality of education using whatever best methods we have. We do not want any student fail at this very stage."

The examination began on November 20 and was supposed to end on November 29. But two tests were rescheduled due to blockades and the exams ended on December 6.

This year, 26.39 lakh students from 87,085 schools registered for the exam. Of them, 25,19,032 appeared in the exam.

The number of schools with cent percent pass rate rose to 73,600. No student from 46 schools passed this year which was 710 last year.

Boys are slightly ahead of girls in terms of success rate although the number of girls who appeared in exams was higher than that of boys. The success rates of boys and girls are 98.62 and 98.54 percent respectively.

Girls, however, outshone the boys in achieving the highest score with some 1,27,785 girls securing GPA-5 compared to 1,13,176 boys.

Monipur High School in the capital has

retained its position for the third time as the best in the country while National Ideal School and Milestone Preparatory KG School secured second and third positions.

Fifteen of the top 20 schools -- in terms of the number of registered students, GPA-5 holders, pass rate and absent rate -- are from Dhaka. The five others are from Khulna, Comilla, and Chittagong.

Like the previous years, schools affiliated with Primary Training Institute (PTI) topped the success chart in terms of pass rate with over 99.84 percent students passing the test.

Among all seven divisions, Barisal topped the list with 99.25 percent success rate. With 96.54 percent pass rate, Sylhet remains at the bottom.

Lalmirhat saw the cent percent pass rate, leaving 63 other districts behind. At the upazila level, 36 out of 506 upazilas saw cent percent pass.

The pass rate of physically and mentally challenged children is over 97.23 percent.

One killed in gunfight

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enforced by the opposition alliance as Jamaat-Shibir activists killed at least 10 ruling Awami League men here in the last six weeks.

To restore the law and order, members of police, Rab and BGB on December 15 jointly launched drives in the district.

Yesterday, the joint forces were patrolling the Vatra area of Kushkhali UP around 12:30pm when some 250 Jamaat-Shibir activists attacked the law enforcers with brickbats and crude bombs, Chowdhury Manjurul Kabir, superintendent of Satkhira police, told The Daily Star.

At one stage, the attackers opened fire on lawmen, forcing the law enforcers to retaliate with gunshots.

As the Jamaat-Shibir men retreated after around an hour, law enforcers found bullet-holed Anarul lying near a pond in the area. Several local arms were recovered from the spot, added Manjurul.

Anarul was rushed to Satkhira Sadar Hospital, where doctors declared him dead.

Enamul Haque, officer-in-charge of Satkhira Sadar Police Station, said the UP chairman was directly involved with all the incidents of violence in the district, unleashed by Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing Islam Chhatra Shibir during the recent

spate of hartals and blockades.

Abdul Mannan, acting chairman of Agardari UP, said the LGRD ministry had suspended Anarul on April 7 for felling roadside trees and carrying out subversive activities.

Abdul Alim, general secretary of Satkhira district BNP, said the deceased was a BNP supporter, but he built a rapport with Jamaat-Shibir men after February 28 when a war crimes tribunal awarded death penalty to Jamaat leader Delawar Hossain Sayeede for committing crimes against humanity during the Liberation War in 1971.

Anarul's sister-in-law Papia Khatun said a few people, identifying themselves as journalists, met the UP chairman at his village home around 9:00am. Since then they did not know Anarul's whereabouts.

In the afternoon, the family members learnt that Anarul had been gunned down at Vatra, about eight kilometres from his village home.

Police handed over the body to Anarul's relatives around 5:00pm after an autopsy was performed on the UP chairman at Satkhira Sadar Hospital.

Police super Chowdhury Manjurul Kabir said the UP chairman was accused in six cases under the speedy trial act, special powers act and narcotics control act.

Are we a democracy?

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open the gates for stick-wielding young men to rush in and beat up the lawyers.

That woman on the ground promises to be a defining picture of this country for a very long time.

In this free republic, it is not proper that citizens be forced to alight from buses and trains on their way to the capital and be told that they cannot go further. Yet that was the outrage committed on Sunday. Citizens have been ill-treated at checkpoints, the BNP has been prevented from emerging on the streets.

In contrast, activists of the ruling Awami League had a free rein. They made sure the capital stayed in their grip, stayed confined to the state of siege they had brought to pass. A number of opposition figures are in prison on charges of causing disturbances on the streets. Not a single ruling party man was carted off to jail for causing minor disturbances on the streets on Sunday.

The definition of a criminal offence thus depends on which side of the fence you belong

In a sovereign country, the opposition does not choose street agitation over parliamentary deliberations. Politicians who aspire to go to power through democratic means do not decree a blockade of the country and bring life to a

screeching halt. Citizens have died in arson; vehicles have been burned to cinders -- in the interest of democracy. How does one explain such criminality?

In a democracy, you may not agree with your opponent. But you certainly do not circumscribe his or her movements. On Sunday and on Monday, the leader of the opposition was stopped from moving out of her residence by hundreds of law enforcers and security personnel.

And yet the general secretary of the ruling party would have the nation know that Khaleda Zia on her own did not wish to leave home for her projected rally. Fine, but why then were all those policemen and Rab personnel gathered at the gate of her residence?

And why were those men of the ruling party carrying lathis, or sticks, as they marched through the city? The Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner has a simple explanation: those were not sticks the men were carrying, but flags. And why were those trucks brimming with sand stationed before the opposition leader's home? No comment.

None of this is enlightening. All of this pushes us deeper into a hole we the people did not dig.

In this cold winter, warmth in the heart and soul has gone missing.