

SCHOOLS SCORCHED

Arson left important documents and books burnt in Baniachhal Govt Primary School polling centre yesterday, *top left*. Alleged opposition activists also burnt the furniture of Borail Govt Primary School in Dinajpur, *top right*. They also trashed and torched the Jaintapur Govt High School in Jaintapur upazila in Sylhet, *bottom left*. A man points to the bottom of the stack of benches at Laksam Atakora Govt Primary School in Comilla where the arsonists tried to light a fire yesterday.



PHOTO: STAR/FOCUS BANGLA

CEC worried at arson attacks

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and maintain law and order,” he told reporters at the EC secretariat yesterday.
Criminals torched at least 79 voting centres at different places, including Dhaka, yesterday, just before the election day.
“Those centres which have been damaged partially need not be shifted. Some centres which have been affected severely will be shifted to nearby centres so that voters do not face any hassle,” the CEC added.
The EC chief also hoped voting would start on time at every constituency, and law and order would improve during the voting period.

When asked who are responsible for this violence, the CEC did not give any direct answer and said, “The countrymen and you [reporters] will observe and judge it.”
Expressing hope that the voting will be transparent, Rakibuddin said, “Overall evaluation on the election will be done on completion of the election.”
Meanwhile, the commission has completed its preparations to hold the polls, said EC officials.
Election materials have already been sent to polling stations escorted by law enforcers. Besides, the materials have been sent to 33

remote voting centres in three hilly districts by helicopters, said EC Assistant Senior Secretary Farhad Hossain yesterday afternoon.
“Polling officials have been duly instructed for conducting the voting and managing the polls results,” he mentioned.
The election results will be shown on a large screen at the EC secretariat.
The voting will be held at 147 constituencies in 59 districts as 153 candidates have already been elected unopposed.
Election officials and law enforcers, who are assigned to discharge their polls duties, will cast their votes through postal ballots.

Violence peaks

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officers and law enforcers.
The attack left assistant presiding officer Zobaidul Haque, 55, also demonstrator at Salondar College, dead and two police constables critically injured. Another assistant presiding officer, Rezaul Karim, suffered severe burns during the attack.
Rushed to Thakurgaon Sadar hospital, Zobaidul was declared dead by the duty doctor. The constables and the poll official are undergoing treatment at the hospital.
In Comilla, the authorities last night suspended voting at four polling centres under Manoharganj upazila after anti-polls activists had burnt down the centres and all the election materials there around 10:30pm.
The centres are Saraspur, Baishgaon and Batabaria primary schools and Laxmanpur High School, confirmed personal assistant of district returning officer Tofazzal Hossain Miah.
The national flag, portrait of Bangabandhu and books were burnt when opposition activists hurled a petrol bomb inside the office room of Borali Govt Primary School, a polling centre, in Dinajpur Sadar upazila.

hurled a petrol bomb at their vehicle in Samoskati village, a stronghold of Jamaat.
As the law enforcers came out of the burning vehicle, the attackers beat them up. The injured were undergoing treatment at Monirampur upazila health complex.
In Rajshahi, two BNP activists were caught with three petrol bombs yesterday evening after they had blasted crude bombs at a polling centre. The blast left two police constables injured.
In Jhenidah, three policemen were wounded when criminals stabbed them at a polling centre in Kotchandpur upazila around 11:00pm.
In Natore railway station, at least 12 passengers of Dinajpur-bound train Ekota Express were injured when BNP activists set fire to one of its compartments by hurling a petrol bomb yesterday morning.
Most of the passengers sustained injuries while getting off the compartment, said Aslam Hossain, officer-in-charge of Sadar Police Station.
A clash between the BNP men, and Awami League activists and law enforcer had erupted right before the attack.
The AL and BNP activists again locked into a clash in rail station market area two hours later. This time the law enforcers had to use 15 bullets and 10 teargas canisters to bring the situation under control, reports our Natore correspondent.
In Bogra, blockaders also set ablaze a truck in Mymensingh town and two motorcycles -- one of a journalist and other of an election commission officer.
In Kurigram town, five people were injured in a clash between BNP and AL activists around 12.05pm.
Criminals set fire to electoral material and equipment yesterday evening while those were being transported to Chittagong.
In the port city, police arrested Shibir activist Hasan Al Banna, 28, with four crude bombs on Syed Shah Road of Bakalia on Friday night.
Md Mohsin, officer-in-charge of Bakalia Police Station, said Banna was one of the petrol bomb makers and Shibir cadres involved in violence in the port city.
In Barisal, arsonists set fire to a pick-up truck around 9.15pm yesterday injuring three. They were rushed to Shere Bangla Medical College Hospital.
Among them one Shariful Sheikh sustained severe burn injuries, burning 60 percent of his body.
In another incident, another pick-up truck was set on fire in Jhalakathi around 10.30pm yesterday, injuring one.
The driver Mohammad Mostofa Kamal, 30 was rushed to Jhalakathi Sadar Hospital.
The arson-hit districts also include Nilphamari, Narsingdi, Kishoreganj, Feni, Netrakona, Sylhet, Sunamganj, Moulvibazar, Laxmipur, Mymensingh, Chandpur, Dinajpur and Brahmanbaria.
In the capital, two people were injured in crude bomb explosions at Islambagh and Manda areas last night. They were rushed to Dhaka Medical College Hospital.
Criminals have reportedly blasted crude bombs all over the city.
Seven vehicles were torched in different upazilas of Gazipur by hartal supporters.
In one of the arson incidents, a truck driver received burn injuries on Dhaka-Tangail road in Mouchak. The driver was rushed to Dhaka Medical College Hospital with 40 percent burns.

Dangers of one-sided elections

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There are 143 centres and 680 booths.
Hanif told The Daily Star that he does not have the money to appoint polling agents to all these booths. All he can try to do is to assign one agent to each centre.
So in such a situation, the stronger candidate can manage fake votes if the presiding and polling officers comply.
Many of the presiding and polling officers are government employees. Since this election

is being held under the AL government, which is certain to retain power after the election, the neutrality of such officers is now under question.
The election administration formed with bureaucrats, many of whom are overwhelmingly politicized, is also another vulnerable spot.
And the guarantee of a photo voter ID to check against fake voting may also fall flat if the officers feel weak.

The other vulnerability arises from the lack of observers this time as the western countries refused to send any. Domestic observers will also be few. This will open up chances for rigging.
And the fourth vulnerability arises from the lack of enthusiasm among the voters themselves. Elections are mainly observed by the voters and if they turn out in low numbers, this basically would leave the voting unchecked.

ELECTION YEAR	PARTIES	CANDIDATES	ELECTED UNOPPOSED	TURNOUT (PERCENT)	WINNER
1973	14	1,209	11	55.6	AL
1979	29	2,547	11	51.3	BNP
1986	28	1,980	0	66.3	JP
1988	8	1,192	18	51.8	JP
1991	75	2,787	0	55.5	BNP
1996 (Feb-15)	41	1,450	49	26.5	BNP
1996 (June 12)	81	2,574	0	75	AL
2001	54	1,939	0	75.6	BNP
2008	38	1,567	0	87.13	AL
2014	12	390 [in 147 seats]	153		

SOURCE: ELECTION COMMISSION

IN NUMBERS

Voting districts	59
Polling centres	18,208
Contesting candidates	390
Independent candidates	104
Returning officers	61
Assistant returning officers	287
Presiding officers	18,208
Assistant presiding officers	91,213
Polling officers	1,82,426
Judicial magistrates	147
Executive magistrates	294
Electoral inquiry committees	103
Local observers	13,341
Foreign observers	4

LAW ENFORCERS

Rab	8,400
Police	80,000
BGB	16,000
Ansar	2,20,000
Coastguards	200
Armed forces personnel	150,000
Total	3,74,600 (around)

Opposition Khaleda Zia has been confined to her residence.
The Jatiya Party led by former dictator HM Ershad looked to be the only cognisable partner of the AL in the election. But since Ershad changed his mind in favour of boycotting one-sided polls, the government has kept him confined to a hospital on the pretext of providing him medical treatment.
The BNP and its ally Jamaat-e-Islami have unleashed violence never seen before in the country to press for installation of a non-partisan government.
In December alone, at least 80 people were killed and more than 850 people wounded in arson attacks and clashes.
None of the western countries has sent any election observer, as they believe that this election excluding the BNP will not be credible.

Election amid fears today

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cast ballots.
The violence that has continued unabated in recent months intensified on the eve of the polling day with around 100 voting centres, mostly schools, burned down by opposition activists across the country.
The outcome of this election had been sealed weeks before. The ruling Awami League has already won 123 of the total 300 seats uncontested and will smoothly sail past the magic number of 151 seats required to form a government, as its opponents are mere minnows and hardly tasted victory in any previous elections.
The BNP that formed government thrice under its leader Khaleda Zia has shunned the polls, citing that an election under a political government headed by Sheikh Hasina promises no fair voting.
Unlike in most other elections in the past, the atmosphere is dull and lacks festivity.
Many voters are either unaware of the candidates or clueless whether there will be any election in their constituencies or the candidates have already been elected unopposed.
In Dhaka city, election will be held for only eight of the 15 seats.
Apart from today's polls, there have

been crises over general election on two occasions since the restoration of democracy in 1990.
In 1996, the AL boycotted the February 15 polls, waging a movement to introduce the caretaker government system to oversee elections. The short-lived parliament formed through the polls led to another election in June the same year widely considered as unblemished.
The election in 2001 also sailed through under a caretaker government. But then in 2007, the BNP tried to tweak the system to have its person of choice at the helm of the caretaker government.
The situation became so volatile that the election couldn't be held and an army-backed caretaker government took over and stayed in power for two years until an election in December 2008.
Five years down the line, democracy once again faces a challenge, tougher than ever before, as the Hasina-led government cancelled the very caretaker government system that she had fought for so vigorously.
And after a gap of around 18 years, the country is again going to an election under a political government.
Many of the opposition leaders have been detained or arrested, and many others are on the run. Leader of the