

US wants fresh polls by June

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EU Ambassador William Hanna hinted that if the political situation remains unchanged it might have an effect on Bangladesh's trade with the EU, said meeting sources.

British High Commissioner Robert Gibson repeatedly underscored the need for holding immediate talks that would lead to a fresh election.

The diplomats expressed disappointment over the January 5 polls that saw 153 candidates elected unopposed. They also strongly condemned the acts of violence during the BNP-Jamaat's hartals and blockades and attacks on minority communities.

Envoys of Russia, China, India, Myanmar and Nepal that congratulated Hasina on her assumption of office as prime minister refrained from making comments at the meeting.

However, Egyptian Ambassador Mahmoud Ezzat termed the January 5 election "very beautiful" and said his country was very happy with the election, said the sources.

Emerging from the meeting, Mozena, Hanna and Gibson talked to the media, and said they expect an initiative from the government to "restart" dialogue with the BNP soon to find a way for holding an inclusive election.

Mozena said, "I was also encouraged by a very clear call that all violence must stop, especially the violence that is directed against minority communities. These are very positive statements from the new minister of state."

He hoped that the two major parties -- the Awami

League and the BNP -- would find a way to "restart" talks immediately for the holding of fresh polls as soon as possible.

Mentioning the BNP chief's press conference on Wednesday and response from some quarters in the ruling party, the US envoy said they had seen some positive steps from both sides.

"So, these are all encouraging steps ... encouraging development," he said.

In his lengthy speech at the meeting, the state minister for foreign affairs sought support from the international community for strengthening democracy in Bangladesh.

He told the diplomats that the government's offer of dialogue for the BNP still stands provided that it cuts ties with the Jamaat-e-Islami and shuns violence.

Shahriar said the government was encouraged by the BNP's renewed interests in having dialogue with the government and its decision to withdraw blockades.

"We hope such decisions and statements from the BNP would help pave the way for a dialogue between the government and the BNP sooner rather than later."

The state minister later briefed the media. When a reporter asked him about the possibility of a mid-term election, he said, "It is too early to make any comment ... we are not under any pressure [from the international community]."

In reply to another query, Shahriar said some countries refrained from congratulating the new government probably in "an effort to put pressure, but



Detectives raiding the daily Inqilab office last night. *Inset*, law enforcers lock up its press. PHOTO: COURTESY

Eat grass, get closer to God! Inqilab sued, 4 journos

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that humans can eat anything they choose to sustain themselves.

When he put up pictures of the grass-eating event on Facebook, he faced severe criticism from thousands of people across the world.

Rabboni Centre Ministries is now a trending topic on social media. But none of that has bothered Daniel's followers; they defend their pastor and swear by his methods.

The 21-year-old law student, Rosemary Phetha, said that the grass instantly cured a sore throat that she had been battling for over a year.

"Yes, we eat grass and we are proud of it

because it demonstrates that, with God's power, we can do anything," she said.

Facebook users, however, had a very different point of view on the pastor's methods.

"This is disgraceful. You should be ashamed to call yourself a pastor," was one comment on the church's Facebook page.

The pastor has yet to respond to the criticism.

Unfortunately, the experiment didn't go down well with many of them. Some of the pictures show men and women clutching their stomachs and throwing up into buckets and toilets.

The church is located in Setlogelo, Ga-Rankuwa, a township north of Pretoria.

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The detainees are News Editor Rabiullah Rabi, Deputy Chief Reporter Rafiq Mohammad, Diplomatic Correspondent Ahmed Atique and Senior Reporter Afzal Bari, the newspaper said.

It said a team of around 25 policemen raided the office inside the seven-storey Inqilab building on RK Mission Road around 8:00pm and left at 10:15pm with the journalists.

Officer-in-Charge Tapan Chandra Saha of Wari Police Station told The Daily Star around 12:50am today that the detainees had not been taken to the police station.

Shamim Chowdhury, a special correspondent of the paper, said the newspaper staff were working in the newsroom on the fourth floor when members of the Detective Branch of Police stormed the office.

"They told us to leave the room with our personal belongings and kept us in the corridor while they raided the place for over one and a half

hours," he said.

Shakhawat Hossain Badsha, another special correspondent, said the paper might not get published today due to the sealing off of the press but news should be available on the online version.

Sub-Inspector Jahangir Alam had lodged the case with Wari Police Station around 2:00pm under the Information, Communication and Technology Act, and under the Penal Code accusing Editor AMM Bahauddin and the three others.

According to a statement issued by the DMP media cell last night, the newspaper on its website and its print edition yesterday published a "baseless" report that Indian forces had helped in the joint forces' operations in Satkhira to suppress the movement for a caretaker government.

The newspaper had reported that the foreign ministry with the permission of the Prime Minister's Office had sent a letter to New Delhi asking for assistance from the Indian armed forces.

The Dhaka Metropolitan Police stated that the "false" news had damaged the image of the country, law enforcement agencies and created doubt in citizens' minds.

Meanwhile, at the first meeting of the new cabinet yesterday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina discussed the Inqilab report with her cabinet colleagues and said her government would not spare anyone who engaged in such anti-state propaganda.

She questioned as to how such "manipulated and fabricated" news could be published by a newspaper, a minister quoted Hasina as saying.

Information Minister Hasanul Haque Inu could not be reached for comments.

Meanwhile, a section of journalist leaders condemned the police raid and detention of journalists. Dhaka Reporters' Unity will hold a protest rally in front of the Jatiya Press Club at 11:00am today.

Cops asked not to arrest

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connection with those cases as they have recently raided his house.

He also claims that there are no specific allegations against him in the cases.

Sagor Hossain Leon, a lawyer for Fakhrul, said police had filed the three cases with Ramna and Shahbagh Police Stations on different dates in November and December.

He added that now police cannot arrest Fakhrul following yesterday's HC orders.

The BNP leader appeared before the HC bench of Justice Borhanuddin and Justice

KM Kamrul Kader during hearings on his petitions.

Advocate AJ Mohammad Ali appeared for Fakhrul, while Deputy Attorney General Md Salim opposed his petitions.

A police constable was killed as arsonists set fire to a requisitioned bus of police in Bangla Motor on December 24.

Four people were killed and several others injured in a petrol bomb attack on a bus in Shahbagh area on November 29.

A man was killed in an arson attack on a bus in Malibagh on November 30.

Temple set on fire in Feni

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The arrest was made when Sadik, 19, son of Abdul Malik of Mohammad Nagar village in the upazila, attempted to flee after blasting the bomb. A mask was recovered from his possession.

"We will interrogate him [Sadik]," Abul Hashem, officer-in-charge (OC) of Borolekha Police Station, told The Daily Star.

Meanwhile, criminals set fire to a jute warehouse, owned by a local Hindu businessman, at Agdia Bazaar in Narail Sadar Upazila, early yesterday.

On information, fire fighters rushed to the spot and doused the blaze after three hours of hectic efforts.

Kumaresh Mojumder, owner of the warehouse, claimed that around 1,050 maunds of jute were gutted in the fire.

"Someone might have carried out the arson attack in sheer jealousy," he said.

Deputy Commissioner Md Abdul Goffar Khan, district police super, among others, visited the spot.

While visiting the affected villages of Hindus in Thakurgaon yesterday, the NHRC chairman said "We cannot avoid the responsibility of such cruel attacks on innocent people."

"You must never think that you are alone and helpless as you are citizens of the country like everyone else," he said.

Mizanur demanded exemplary punishment for the perpetrators of the attacks.

Meanwhile, police arrested Ripon Mia, general secretary of Pogla Union BNP, yesterday for his alleged involvement in setting fire to a Kali temple at Bottola village in Netrakona on January 8.

Egypt voters back

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overthrow of Mohamed Morsi.

Egypt's new constitution strengthens the country's three key institutions -- the military, the police and the judiciary -- as well as removing certain Islamist-leaning clauses inserted under Morsi, and gives more rights to women and disabled people.

Provisional results suggested turnout was just over 38% -- higher than the 33% who voted in a referendum during Morsi's tenure, but lower than the 41.9% who turned out in a similar poll following Egypt's 2011 uprising.

In the buildup to the poll, General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, the army chief who ousted Morsi last July, hinted he would view a strong yes vote and a high turnout as a mandate to run for the presidency later this year.

"The people say 'Yes,'" said a front-page headline in Al-Akhbar, while Al-Ahram reported that 90 percent of voters had backed the charter.

After two days of voting that were marred by sporadic and deadly clashes between Morsi's Islamist supporters and police, polling ended at 9:00 pm Wednesday.

Final results are expected within 72 hours from then.

Officials have said army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who toppled the Islamist Morsi in July, will closely monitor turnout as he mulls going for the top job himself in an election promised for later this year.

Sisi has said he is prepared to run if there is enough popular support, and the referendum is seen as providing the first concrete test.

Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood, now designated a terrorist group, had hoped a low turnout would send a message of

discontent over Morsi's overthrow and a brutal crackdown on his supporters.

On Tuesday, clashes between Morsi supporters and their opponents and police killed at least nine people, but no fatal incidents were reported Wednesday.

Additionally, at least 444 people were arrested for protesting and disrupting polling, the interior ministry said.

The government said it was aiming for a larger turnout than the 33 percent of 53 million registered voters who approved a constitution under Morsi in 2012 by 64 percent.

"We are hoping it exceeds 50 percent," government spokesman Hany Salah told AFP.

Analysts say a turnout higher than that will decide the future of the Muslim Brotherhood.

"A turnout higher than what the 2012 constitution received will show that Morsi and the Brotherhood have been excluded from the country's political scene, at least in the near term," Hassan Nafea, professor of political science at Cairo University, told AFP.

The Brotherhood dominated every poll held since the ouster of long-time ruler Hosni Mubarak in early 2011.

But the movement, accused of trying to monopolise power, quickly alienated many Egyptians after Morsi took office.

The new constitution has done away with much of the Islamist-inspired wording of Morsi's charter. It bolsters the military's powers and allows it to try civilians for attacks on the armed forces.

Interim president Adly Mansour's government has pledged that the referendum will be followed by parliamentary and

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"As it was the BNP-led alliance's movement, the blame for such violence naturally falls on our shoulder. This is another reason for which she [Khaleda] went for soft programmes," a BNP standing committee member said yesterday.

Another key factor was the international pressure against the BNP-backed violent anti-government movement and the attacks on Hindus. The diplomats vouched for democratic and peaceful demonstrations, sources said.

Some diplomats told Khaleda that it would be hard for them to convince the government to arrange a quick election if the violence continued.

The diplomats also succeeded in convincing Khaleda that the ruling party would be compelled to hold another election within the next six months, if her party behaved in an acceptable manner, the party sources said.

The BNP's resist-polls movement ran out of steam and left the party demoralised. A BNP standing committee member commented, "We have failed to stop the marriage, then how can we refrain them from giving birth to a child?"

"Whether we accept it or not, it is the reality that a government was formed through the January 5 election ...," the member added.

The BNP senior leader said the party high-ups as well as its chief had finally understood that they should not be bent on forcing the government through a movement to hold another election soon.

"And madam's [Khaleda's] stance revealed on Wednesday is a reflection of her coming to terms with the reality."

Despite the 18-party alliance's threat to resist the 10th parliamentary polls, the election was held amid record violence that took the lives of at least 18 people.

Immediately after the election, BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, senior vice-chairman Tarique Rahman vowed to go for nonstop agitation to force the government to cancel the election results.

The alliance had continued to enforce blockades and hartals until January 12.

But Khaleda's soft stance after that was appreciated by different quarters at home and abroad. She had called for a dialogue for holding a fresh election.

Now if the government does not respond positively to the opposition's "olive branch", the people would not blame the BNP, party sources say.

"If the government responds negatively, we will be able to argue at home and abroad that we had no alternative but to go for a tougher movement to force the holding of a free, fair and inclusive

Jessore women turn up big

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Monirampur were raped allegedly by men of the Islamist party on the night of January 7.

Apart from Jessore-5, re-elections took place in six other constituencies -- Dinajpur-4, Gaibandha-1, 3, 4, Bogra-7 and Laxmipur-1 -- amid tight security. Elections were peaceful and no incidents of violence were reported.

The other constituency -- Kurigram-4 -- was also scheduled to go to vote yesterday, but the polls were postponed following a High Court order on Wednesday.

According to the unofficial results, three seats went to the AL and one each to Jatiya Party and Tarikat Federation. Two independent candidates took the two other seats.

In Jessore-5, independent candidate Swapna Bhattacharjee won by bagging 78,424 votes, while AL-nominated Khan Tipu Sultan got 58,418 votes.

In Dinajpur-4, AL candidate Abul Hasan Mahmud Ali won by bagging 1,42,641 votes. His nearest competitor Enamul Haque Sarker of Workers Party got 2,797 votes.

In Bogra-7, Muhammad Altaf Ali of JP won by getting 17,879 votes, while ATM Aminul Islam of

Jatiya Party (JP-Manju) polled 10,104 votes.

In Gaibandha-1, AL candidate Manjurul Islam Liton won by getting 1,18,152 votes while his opponent Abdul Quader Khan of JP got 13,044 votes.

In Gaibandha-3, AL's Yunus Ali Sarker won by bagging 1,27,563 votes and his rival independent candidate Khademul Islam Khudi got 18,204 votes.

In Gaibandha-4, independent candidate Abul Kalam Azad won by bagging 98,546 votes and AL's Monowar Hossain Chowdhury got 64,614 votes.

In Laxmipur-1, Bangladesh Tarikat Federation's MA Awal bagged 49,656 votes, while his rival independent candidate Shafiqul Islam got 21,859 votes. Awal ran with the AL electoral symbol, boat.

EC officials said voter turnout was around 40 percent on average in these seven constituencies, but it was around 6.75 percent in Bogra.

The overall turnout in the January 5 election was also nearly 40 percent, they added.

After the re-elections, the AL now has 234 seats, Ershad's JP 34, Workers Party six, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal five, Jatiya Party (JP-Manju) one, Bangladesh Tarikat Federation two and

Bangladesh Nationalist Front (BNF) one. The number of independent lawmakers is 16.

Security was tight during the polls yesterday. A team of more than 30 police and Ansar members were deployed at each polling station.

As many as 131 mobile forces and 42 strike forces comprised of police, Armed Police Battalion and Ansar members were deployed in the seven constituencies. In addition, 81 teams of Rab and 81 teams of BGB were on duty.

Jessore-5

Defying the cold weather and fears of violence, women voters lined up in polling centres in huge numbers from the early hours of the voting that began at 8:00am.

The presence of male voters was thin.

"We didn't vote on January 5 for fear of violence. But now the situation is better as a large number of law enforcers have been deployed at the polling centres. We don't care about threats if the police are with us," said Rama Rani Das at Syeed Mahmud Primary School centre.

Phooljan Khatun, an elderly woman of Aminpur village in Monirampur, voted at Chineta Primary School centre.

"Voting is my right and I feel happy to cast my

Euro resolution slams violence

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the run-up to the January 5 elections and expressed concern at the paralysis of everyday life in Bangladesh.

"The opposition politicians, subject to arbitrary arrest, should be released, parties having a democratic reputation need to develop a culture of mutual respect, and parties which turn to terrorist acts should be banned," said the MEPs.

Earlier, the motion was moved for discussion at the EP on the January 5 election of Bangladesh at its debate chamber in Strasbourg, France.

The debate focused on fundamental freedoms, human rights and democracy in general in Bangladesh.

DEBATE IN UK PARLIAMENT

Meanwhile, MPs yesterday debated in Britain's House of Commons on the situation in Bangladesh. It was scheduled by the Backbench Business Committee following representations from Simon Danczuk and Anne Main.

The debate, the first item of yesterday's main business, was opened by Anne Main, with Simon Danczuk taking part in it. Various issues related to elections and Bangladesh politics dominated the debate.

"We could not possibly look at the current political situation and sense of instability in Bangladesh without briefly revisiting what has

happened in the past, which has helped to form the situation," Anne Main said.

During the debate, she also said, "Our government, I am proud to say, continue to urge all parties to work together and to strengthen democratic accountability, but unfortunately it is not bearing a lot of fruit. The parliamentary model over there does not reflect ours."

"Bangladesh is a secular country that has many Muslim believers, but many other religions as well. In 1971, it had the proud aim that it would remain secular. It is also a proud member of the Commonwealth. It is a disservice to that country that people from minority religions now feel so oppressed and intimidated, with their temples being daubed and disrupted," Main said.

Anne Main added there was not full voter participation in the January 5 election. To put it mildly it was about 30 percent and there was non-participation by the leading opposition.

"I am sorry to say that the democratic process improved nothing between 2006 and the latest election in 2014. That is deeply disappointing given the amount of the British aid budget that goes into supporting the strengthening of democracy in Bangladesh, such as the training of civil servants," she added.

Taking part in the debate, Martin Horwood said the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and other

opposition parties have to tread carefully too. "Boycotting elections, abandoning the democratic high ground of participation and calling for the overthrow of elected governments is a dangerous path to tread."

He said opposition groups and activists have clearly been involved in violence, and there have been accusations, particularly against some of the most controversial members of the opposition, including Jamaat-e-Islami, of violence against Christian and Hindu minorities, which is particularly concerning.

Rushanara Ali said, "It is scandalous and unforgivable that those in positions of power, of whichever political party, cannot put their differences behind them and focus on the interests, both economic and social, of the country and its people."

On violence, she said the point is that that cycle of violence must stop.

Turning to the election, she said many have complained that the "election process was not, by any standards, free and fair."

She added that it was a matter of great frustration that the leaders of the major political parties in Bangladesh were not able to reach a compromise that would have led to free and fair elections.