

# VOTING NOT AT ITS BEST

Jatiya Party supporters gather inside the Narayanganj Bar Academy polling centre yesterday, *top*, to cast fake votes for their candidate Selim Osman around 4:10pm. Osman's men stand on a road near a polling centre in Bandar area and try to convince and in some cases intimidate voters into voting for Osman, *left*. Frustrated by the confusion over their voter numbers even though they have their ID cards, voters file complaints with the returning officer at Narayanganj Club centre, *middle*. Election officials, *right*, idle the time away at Narayanganj Govt Mahila College polling centre, devoid of voters, around 11:00am.

PHOTO: STAR



## Selim Osman wins, Narayanganj loses

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creating a sense of panic among voters.

Selim's supporters, who enjoyed the AL's blessings, allegedly obstructed voters who they considered loyal to the rival camp. They also drove away Akram's polling agents from at least seven polling stations, alleged the chief election agent of the independent candidate.

Shamim Osman even hurled threats at Assistant Superintendent of Police Bashir Ahmed, who had barred some of Selim's followers from casting fake votes at Keodhala Primary School in Madanpur union.

Akram last night rejected the election results and claimed there had been rigging and casting of fake votes in at least 30 polling centres.

He alleged that his polling agents were driven out of those polling centres by Selim's followers with the help of law enforcers and the administration.

It has been proved from this election that the government does not want to see "fair politics" flourish in the country, and the Election Commission is good for nothing, Akram said at a press briefing at his Sanarpukur house in Narayanganj.

Difficulties in finding out voters'

serial numbers also contributed to the low turnout, only about 45 per cent. Despite frantic attempts, many voters could not cast ballots as they failed to find their voter numbers at polling centres.

Interestingly, no incident of violence took place during the polls that clearly lacked a sense of festivity and enthusiasm among voters.

The parliamentary seat fell vacant following the death of JP lawmaker Nasim Osman, who was elected unopposed in the January 5 national elections, on April 30. The AL had decided to leave the seat to the JP.

Though two more candidates were in the race, the battle of ballots was fought mainly between Selim and Akram.

The polling began at 8:00am and ended at 4:00pm amid a huge presence of law enforcers.

Three teams from The Daily Star visited 35 of the 141 voting centres in the constituency, and found a thin presence of voters in the first half of the polling.

The turnout, however, started increasing in the second half.

For example, only 15 votes were cast in the first one hour of polling at Kurimari High School centre in Bandar area. But the number went up to 1,500 in the end.

Some other polling centres also witnessed a poor turnout in the first half. Only 200 votes were cast in the first three hours at Narayanganj Club Ltd centre that has 3,656 voters.

"The turnout is very low. We don't know what will happen in the afternoon and why voters are not coming," Shah Alam, presiding officer at the centre, said in the morning.

Narayanganj High School and College was one of the polling centres where only a handful of voters were seen waiting. The centre has 2,101 voters, but only 250 ballots were cast till 11:30am.

"By-polls usually witness a low turnout as people take less interest in them," said Mokbul Hossain, presiding officer at the centre.

Talking to The Daily Star, a number of voters said people preferred to stay back home either fearing violence and backlash or for a lack of interest.

"We don't want to be in trouble for going to the centre," said a grocer when asked why he had not cast his vote.

He said if Selim Osman was defeated, they would be blamed for casting ballots against Selim in the by-polls.

Some voters at Narayanganj Bar

Academy alleged that Selim's campaigners asked them to go back home without casting ballots. A large number of Selim's supporters were in front of the centre.

Around 12:00noon, a correspondent of this newspaper found a youth casting a fake vote at Narayanganj Government Girls College centre.

Another youth was found trying to cast a vote for an aged voter named Akram Hossain Palash at a booth in the centre around 3:00pm.

Challenged by the correspondent, he left the scene hurriedly.

Asked, Polling Officer Mohammad Nuruzzaman said a few people came to cast fake votes, but they were driven out.

Claiming himself as Sukumar Roy, another youth tried to cast a vote at booth-2 of Narayanganj Bar Academy centre. But the polling officer challenged him as his face didn't match with Sukumar's photo on the voter list. The officer then drove him out of the booth.

Minutes before the voting was to end, a group of youths stormed booth-3 and stuffed ballot boxes for nearly 15 minutes. When a photographer of this newspaper started taking pictures, the youths surrounded him and kept him confined for several minutes.

They deleted the photographs from his camera and stuffed a Tk 1,000 note into his trouser pocket. When the photographer refused to take the money, they threatened to beat him up.

They then drove him out of the booth, closed the door and continued stuffing the ballot boxes.

On condition of anonymity, some voters said Selim's campaigners paid voters Tk 50 to Tk 2,000 since Wednesday night for casting ballots for the JP candidate.

"I got Tk 400 last night. But don't ask me who gave it," a middle-aged voter in Battala area told The Daily Star.

A salesperson at a shop near Kuripara polling centre said, "It doesn't matter who you vote for ... the fate of the election has already been sealed. Osman [Selim] will win."

Selim's campaigners bought votes the night before the election, the shopkeeper said.

Mahbubur Rahman, chief agent of Akram, alleged that their polling agents were driven out of different centres, including Kumudini Welfare Trust, Nalua Government Primary School (No-13), Madhabpasha Government Primary School, and Barpara Government Primary School.

## TROUBLED IRAQ 27 expats to return home on July 1

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 27 Bangladeshi workers are expected to return home on July 1 from Iraq on 'security ground' as the war-torn country is facing severe internal conflicts involving different forces.

"More than 100 employees of our company have resigned and decided to return to Bangladesh. The company has already accepted the resignation letters of 27 persons," said Abu Orthi, one of the Bangladeshis, who works in Hanwha Engineering and Construction, a South Korean company in Iraq.

"They (27 persons) have bought air tickets and are likely to return home by a Qatar Airways flight on July 1," he confirmed to The Daily Star through an e-mail yesterday.

The South Korean company is working on a project named "Bismaya New City Project" in South Baghdad. Around 4,000 Bangladeshis are working there in constant fear of attacks by Sunni insurgents as the latter have already swept over a large part of the country's north since June 5 and are advancing to the south.

## Old hopes given anew by BJP

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But no clear assurance or time-bound indication came during the meeting of the two foreign ministers in Dhaka yesterday.

However, New Delhi's diplomatic message for the press termed the meeting "constructive, productive, fruitful and successful." Dhaka too considered it very positive and said a new horizon in Indo-Bangladesh relations would open up in the days to come.

Both sides expressed their willingness to further accelerate engagement and strengthen the framework of bilateral relations for setting up a new era of cooperation of connectivity across the South Asian region.

The talks in Dhaka yesterday focused on India-Bangladesh connectivity in terms of people, energy, transport and exchange of ideas.

Highly placed sources said though there was no clear-cut assurance from the Indian side for an early resolution of pending issues, including the ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) and signing of an interim agreement on Teesta water sharing, there was a positive tone toward actively considering the issues.

During the talks, Sushma Swaraj assured Bangladesh that efforts were on to reach a national consensus in India on the Teesta river water sharing deal and LBA ratification.

Swaraj, who arrived here Wednesday night on a 3-day visit, also called on President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

She handed over Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitation to Hasina for a visit to India at her earliest convenience.

The Indian minister spoke on the theme of India-Bangladesh Relations: A Framework for Cooperation organised by Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) at Ruposhi Bangla Hotel.

She is due to meet leader of the opposition Roushan Ershad and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia prior to leaving Dhaka at a little after noon today.

Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali and India's spokesperson Syed Akbaruddin briefed the media separately on the outcome of the meetings.

"We've discussed all the issues of mutual interest in a cordial atmosphere," said Mahmood Ali, who had an hour long meeting with his Indian counterpart at the foreign ministry in the morning.

He said issues related to political and security cooperation on regional and sub-regional basis, energy, trade, water resources management, people to people contact and cultural exchanges were discussed during the meeting.

The Indian Minister has assured him of working together with Bangladesh to

### KEY POINTS

Bangladesh will not allow its territory for terrorist activities against India

India promises not to give shelter to criminals from Bangladesh

Ratification of Land Boundary Agreement being actively considered

Holding JRC meeting at a convenient time

Increasing service frequency of Maitree Express

Setting up 4 more border haats on Meghalaya border

strengthen the existing ties between the two countries. "India is always there for Bangladesh," he quoted Sushma Swaraj as saying at the meeting.

On the Teesta issue, he said efforts were on in India to build internal consensus on the issue. "She [Swaraj] expressed her hope over a signing of the Teesta deal."

About LBA, Mahmood Ali said Bangladesh requested the Indian side for the ratification of the agreement. "The Indian minister also expressed hope about its settlement. She also mentioned that the matter was under active consideration in the Rajya Sabha."

About easing the Indian visa policy for Bangladesh, he said the Indian side had agreed to provide five-year multiple tourist visas to Bangladeshi nationals aged below 13 and above 65.

Indian spokesperson Syed Akbaruddin at another press conference said, "As far as India is concerned, we're not a sanctuary for criminals. If there are any criminals in India, they will be returned to Bangladesh. It is not our policy to give sanctuary to criminals from Bangladesh."

He added, "India and Bangladesh as friendly neighbours are committed to address issues of concern to each other."

"There was an understanding that we need to promote exchanges of all types -- exchanges relating to people, relating to

down border killings at zero level, introduce Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati bus service on an experimental basis, provide 100-MW more electricity from Palatana plant in Tripura, extradite Bangladeshi criminals from India and hold the meeting of Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) at a convenient time.

In reply to a question, the foreign minister said there had not been any discussion on the issue of illegal migration. "The Indian side did not raise the issue at all during the talks."

However, he said, extradition of fugitive Narayanganj seven-murder accused Nur Hossain from India and Ulfa leader Anup Chetia from Bangladesh was discussed.

"We have been told to make a formal request and we hope to get back Nur Hossain at an early date," he said.

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goods and services."

Terming Bangladesh a very important neighbour, he said focus has been on Bangladesh-India connectivity during the meetings between the two sides -- connectivity in terms of people, energy, transport, exchange of ideas.

The spokesperson said Sushma Swaraj had come to Bangladesh with a message of friendship and her conversations here were very cordial and warm.

Responding to a question, he said there had been no discussion on domestic politics. "We have great respect for Bangladesh. We will never ever try to look at it in terms of narrow party politics."

He added the Indian leadership got an indication from the Bangladesh leadership that Dhaka was uncompromising in its opposition to terrorism in any form and manifestation and that Bangladesh would never allow its territory to be used against India.

Responding to another question, he said the Indian external affairs minister had talked to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. "They had a very pleasant and useful conversation."

He, however, did not go into details about the discussions between the two. "She [Mamata] wished all success during [Swaraj's] visit to Bangladesh."

It was Mamata's opposition that led to the postponement of the Teesta deal during the 2011 Dhaka visit of their