



Left, in protest against alleged ballot stuffing by supporters of a ruling party candidate, their rivals including BNP men vandalised this polling station at Kamalapur Sher-e-Bangla Railway School and College yesterday. The photo was taken at 11:45am. Right, a police officer stands in a room bearing the signs of clashes between the supporters of an Awami League-backed councillor candidate and a party rebel around 12:30pm. Several ballot boxes were damaged during the violence.

PHOTO: STAR



Voting free of fear, interference: PM

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday claimed her government had ensured peoples' right to freedom of expression and voters were casting votes freely.

"It's pleasant to see one can exercise his voting rights in a peaceful atmosphere, free from any interference and fear. The nation had struggled for a long time to establish peoples' voting rights," she told reporters after casting her votes at the Dhaka City College polling centre in the morning.

Also the Awami League chief, Hasina announced that she would accept the polls results whatever they may be as her party is always respectful of the peoples' mandate.

She hoped her party favourites would win the polls in Dhaka and Chittagong.

The PM said she voted for "hilsa", "kite" and "betel leaf" symbols. These are the polls symbols of the AL-backed mayor, councillor and reserved women councillor hopefuls in ward-15 of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC).

On the BNP's threat of launching an anti-government movement, Hasina said it meant that the party would not accept the polls results and was not respectful of the peoples' verdict.

"It [election] would be good if their candidates are victorious. Otherwise, they would go for a movement. What type of mindset is that?" she questioned.

PRESS MEETS

The AL held three press conferences in the two cities shortly after the three BNP-backed mayor aspirants pulled out of the polls.

Speaking at a press conference at the party chief's Dhanmondi office, AL Joint General Secretary Mahbul Alam Hanif said the BNP's boycotting of city polls was "pre-planned to make the elections questionable."

"The BNP joined the polls race as part of an evil design. It quit the race after being sure of its defeat and to find an issue for waging a movement," he added.

Former food minister Abdur Razzak, SEE PAGE 12 COL 3

US, UK upset over rigging, intimidation

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Expressing disappointment over yesterday's city corporation polls in Dhaka and Chittagong, the US and the UK have called for a swift, impartial and transparent investigation into the allegations of election irregularities.

"We are disappointed by widespread, first-hand, and credible reports of vote-rigging, intimidation and violence that have occurred at polling stations today [yesterday], and the BNP's decision to boycott the city corporation polls," said a statement of the US embassy in Dhaka.

The statement also said, "It is important that irregularities be investigated transparently and impartially, and we call on all parties involved to work within the law and avoid violence at all costs."

"We condemn in the strongest terms any use of violence for political objectives," it added.

US Ambassador to Bangladesh Marcia Stephens Bloom Bernicat in a tweet has expressed disappointment "to hear so many first-hand reports of intimidation and violence and their effect on today's [yesterday's] city polls in Bangladesh."

SEE PAGE 12 COL 2

It's mockery of democracy: BNP

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP yesterday said it joined the city polls race hoping that the elections would be free and fair, but the government has made the polls "meaningless with a widespread vote-rigging by the Awami League men."

"The way the city corporation polls were held can't be termed elections. It was a mockery of democracy. We've rejected and boycotted the voterless elections," BNP leader Moudud Ahmed told an emergency press conference at the party's Nayapaltan central office around 12:20pm.

He alleged that pro-AL men with the help of law enforcers and polling officials resorted to vote-rigging and occupied polling centres.

"We think the turnout was not even five percent. It has been proved through today's [Tuesday's] elections that nobody in the country enjoys the right to vote.... Voting was rigged and ballot boxes were grabbed [by ruling party men] for stuffing ballots."

He said only those who had slips of paper

from the supporters of the ruling party-backed candidates were allowed in the polling centres. "Many voters were driven away from the polling centres publicly."

Former Dhaka University vice-chancellor Prof Emajuddin Ahmed was insulted by some ruling party men when he along with his family members went to a polling centre to cast votes, complained Moudud.

"He [Emajuddin] was asked why he had been there and told that he had no right to cast votes," said the BNP leader.

Speaking at the press briefing, Tabith Awal, the BNP-blessed mayor aspirant in Dhaka North City Corporation, and Afroza Abbas, wife of the party-backed mayor hopeful Mirza Abbas in Dhaka South City Corporation, brought some more allegations against the government and the Election Commission.

Earlier around 11:15am, BNP-backed Chittagong mayor hopeful Manjur Alam announced that he was pulling out from the mayoral race protesting a "massive vote-rigging."

Was BNP serious?

FROM PAGE 1

"All agents of BNP-backed mayoral candidates were driven out of all polling stations by noon," Moudud Ahmed, standing committee member of BNP, said at an impromptu press conference at the party's Naya Paltan central office.

The Daily Star visited 299 polling centres in Dhaka North and South and found pro-BNP polling agents only at 25 centres. While in Chittagong city, the party had polling agents at 10 out of 26 polling stations visited by our correspondents.

According to the electoral laws, a contestant can appoint only one agent at a polling booth to watch out for voting fraud.

A polling station consists of several polling booths. There are 5,892 booths at 1,093 polling centres in Dhaka South, while Dhaka North has 889 polling centres with 4,746 booths. In CCC, the number of booths is 4,906.

Mohammad Liton, a polling agent of BNP's Dhaka North mayoral hopeful Tabith Awal, was given the assignment at MDC Model Institute polling station around 6:00am yesterday, just two hours before the voting opened.

"I was not prepared at all. However, I agreed to take up the job. This clearly indicates that the BNP high-ups did not assign responsible persons to look after the pre-voting formalities," he added.

Some BNP men were seeking permission for assigning polling agents to seven booths at a polling centre of Mohammadpur Government Primary School around 8:00pm.

"It was too late for getting a polling agent's pass. They could have come last night or earlier today," said Abu Bakar Chowdhury, the presiding officer.

However, five polling agents were allowed. Around 10:00am, a man introducing himself to be a polling agent of Tabith Awal showed up at Mohammadpur Government Science College at Mohammadpur. Three polling centres were set up there.

But he was found to be a fraud after being grilled by the polling officer.

The BNP's lack of sincerity about the election was also noticed when party-endorsed heavyweight Abdul Awal Mintoo made a silly mistake while submitting his nomination papers to contest the Dhaka North mayoral election.

Mintoo's disqualification apparently paved the way for candidacy of his 36-year-old son Tabith, an unknown face in politics. A section of BNP men termed Mintoo's mistake a deliberate act to let his son join the race.

Prof Emajuddin Ahmed, convener of pro-BNP citizen's platform Adarsha Dhaka Andolan, a think-tank for the party, opposed Tabith's candidacy. Emajuddin supported Bikolpodhara Bangladesh leader Mahi B Chowdhury, party insiders said.

Tabith drew criticism from within the party after he launched campaign. His electioneer-

ing was devoid of enthusiasm, some BNP leaders said.

The mayor (selected) of undivided Dhaka City Corporation in 1991-92, Mirza Abbas got the party backing as Dhaka South's mayoral candidate. Accused in number of cases, he didn't dare appear before public to carry out his electioneering apparently for fear of arrest.

A number of BNP leaders said Abbas should have conducted the electioneering in person. Even had he been arrested, he would have got public sympathy. But he remained a fugitive, they added.

"He didn't care about winning the polls or gaining public support," said one of the leaders.

Everything

FROM PAGE 20

The identity of Mondal was confirmed by Kamal Uddin, officer-in-charge of Airport Police Station, who was on-duty there. Kamal said Mondal was the sole agent of Annisul Huq.

Asked why police allowed Mondal to oversee the polling, Kamal said, "He [Mondal] did not do anything in my presence."

Kamal was seen having a meeting with Mondal and his men on the lobby of the school. The Daily Star has a video of their meeting.

A member of Bangladesh Ansar and VDP, who was on-duty at the polling centre, admitted that he as well as the OC helped the AL leader inside the polling station.

"The OC helped Mondal a lot," said Ansar member Kazi Anam, who mistook this correspondent for being a ruling party man.

Later, Mondal was seen briefing Anam on what to do to get more voters and votes.

Sporting a vest of the Ansar-VDP, a youth introducing himself as Sayekul Islam was seen frantically directing and pushing voters into a polling booth.

However, sensing the presence of journalists, the supporters of Mondal tried to chase them away but the reporters left the place.

Meanwhile, talking to The Daily Star, Kazi Md Mizanur Rahman, presiding officer of one of the three centres at Government Titumir College, expressed his frustration over the election, as, he said, it was marked by irregularities and showdown of ruling party activists.

"There was no festive mood since the beginning and the election lost its festivity when other contestants announced boycott of the polls," he said.

He alleged that a large number of BCL activists entered the polling centre around 10:00pm Monday, but the police did not come forward even though he had called them. He said he also informed the incident to assistant returning officer of Gulshan Zone.



Four different moments at the polling station set up at the law faculty of Dhaka University yesterday. Later, around 2:00pm, two journalists of this newspaper were assaulted by ruling party men.

PHOTO: STAR

BCL foils Star's constant vigilance

FROM PAGE 1

2:00pm by BCL men wearing badges of Awami League-backed mayoral candidate Sayeed Khokon.

The Daily Star sent the reporters as part of its tradition to ensure constant vigilance over a centre to gain insight into how the poll was progressing there every hour.

The newspaper assigned reporters, in a similar fashion, in the 2001, 2008 and 2014 national elections to ensure daylong coverage of at least one polling centre. However, none of its reporters had ever faced any such attack before.

The reporters appeared at the centre around 8:00am, and were barred in several phases from entering the booths by a police officer who was stationed there, and the presiding officer.

As one reporter pointed out that it was only the curtained portion of a booth where a jour-

nalist cannot enter, they were allowed in.

When they took a break at a roadside tea shop near the Central Shaheed Minar in the afternoon, 10 to 12 BCL men came rushing to them. They asked the reporters to follow them towards Dhaka Medical College. Asked why, one BCL man rudely replied, "You' will see."

As the reporters showed them their visiting cards, the BCL men dragged them and started punching and kicking them. They also shouted: "Beat the BNP agent ... fake journalists."

The BCL men also robbed Porimol of his mobile phone, backpack, note book and some necessary papers.

After beating and harassing them for about five minutes, they told the reporters, "Run. Run away."

Porimol and Mahubb were later

taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where they took treatment.

A general diary was filed in this connection with Shahbagh Police Station.

The centre of the Dhaka South City Corporation had around 25 polling agents, belonging mostly to AL-backed candidates. However, only four agents of BNP-backed mayoral candidate Mirza Abbas were seen, but they left the centre around 11:05am.

Around 12:30pm, the presiding officer counted that 458 votes were cast till then. However, until 12:00 noon, The Daily Star reporters found that the number of voters entering the centre was 352.

Around 1:30pm, a police officer, stationed at the centre, asked the reporters to go downstairs, saying that a deputy commissioner wanted to meet with them. He also claimed that the name of the DC was Masud

Rana.

As these correspondents went downstairs, Masud asked if they were journalists. When they replied in the positive, Masud said journalists were not allowed to stay at a centre throughout the day. He then asked them to leave the venue.

"You will come, visit and go. You cannot stay constantly," he told them.

In reply to a query, Masud even claimed it was a written rule, but he was not carrying the written copy with him.

It was right after this conversation with Masud that the BCL men showed up and attacked the correspondents.

The total voters for the Annex Building Centre were 1826 but the total number of votes cast could not be known as the reporters were driven out.