

BCL men

FROM PAGE 20
ruling party-backed candidates to manipulate voting.

But neither police nor the election officials prevented them.

Wishing anonymity, a presiding officer said, "I cannot do anything here. They [AL men] are controlling everything."

Election Commissioner Shahnewaz, who was visiting the school at that time, said he got complaints of fake voting by outsiders. "We will look into it," he told The Daily Star.

Similar pictures were seen inside the booths at the polling centres of nearby Siddheswari Girls' College. BCL men were putting pressure on the polling officials to help them stuff ballot boxes.

Pointing to an election official, a BCL activist said, "Drive him out of the booth if he tries to exert authority." All polling agents then came out of the booth.

At Udayan High School centre, a group of BCL leaders gave threats to the presiding officer for barring them from entering the polling centre on Dhaka University campus around 12:45pm.

"The BCL leaders threatened me over the phone. They asked whether I will let them stuff votes in favour of their candidates. Or else they will do it forcibly," Abdul Matin, presiding officer at the centre, told this correspondent.

Matin received the threat after he prevented a group of BCL men from entering the centre. He suspended voting for 15 minutes from 12:30pm.

"I could not continue polling procedures as BCL men were trying to enter the centre," he said.

At about the same time, former BCL leader Mainuddin Babu, a ward councillor candidate, was seen leading a procession of more than a hundred BCL activists towards the centre.

Before voting began at Dhaka College centre, a big number of BCL leaders and activists gathered in front of the college, and staged a showdown.

Around 9:00am, dozens of BCL men stormed into the centre, creating panic all around. They entered the booths at will and stuffed ballot boxes. A few law enforcers even helped them out.

Presiding and polling officers there played the role of silent spectators as the BCL men took full control of the centre in the presence of a small number of voters.

At polling centre-2 of Kamalapur Sher-e-Bangla Railway High School, two youths drove out the polling agents, except for those of AL-backed candidates, at 12:35pm.

One of them shouted at the polling agents, "Why you are still here when your candidate pulled out of the polls race. You get out."

BCL activists also staged a show-down at the polling centres of Mirpur National Govt Primary School, Mirpur University College and Bangabandhu Bidyaniketan in Mirpur, creating panic among voters and polling agents of BNP-endorsed candidates.

Three voters at Bidyaniketan centre alleged that BCL men had barred them from entering the centre.

In Chittagong city, several correspondents of The Daily Star visited 26 of the 719 polling centres and saw vote rigging, mostly by BCL men, in at least one-third of these centres.

Some of them admitted to the correspondents that they are involved with the BCL units at different educational institutions in the port city.

As voting started, a few hundred BCL men entered the booths at Agrabad T&T Colony Government Primary School centre, and cast ballots for AL-backed candidates.

"We cannot do anything ... I heard these Chhatra League men [around 200] came from Feni," a police officer there told one of the correspondents, seeking anonymity.

Carrying badges with "elephant" symbol of AL-backed mayoral candidate AJM Nasir, around two hundred BCL men crowded the entrance of Barik Miah Government Primary School centre around 10:30am.

Even two correspondents of The Daily Star found it difficult to make their way in.

As voters tried to enter the centre, the youths told them that their ballots had already been cast, and advised them to leave. The law enforcers were seen standing there.

Some of the voters managed to enter the centre. They tried to cast votes but were driven out.

Talking to The Daily Star on Monday, the AL and BCL insiders said a plan was taken up to use BCL men for creating panic and preventing polling agents of rival candidates from going to polling centres.

If necessary, the BCL men would rig votes to ensure victory for AL-backed candidates as planned.

In the capital, BCL activists in all dormitories of Dhaka University were asked to gather at the polling centres on the campus and its surrounding areas.

Around 200-300 activists would be there at every centre to stage show-downs and take control of voting.

In the port city, ballot boxes were stuffed in most of the polling centres by 12:00noon yesterday, according to the plan.

Voting not well at all

FROM PAGE 1
League-backed mayoral candidate for Dhaka City South, and stuffed them into the ballot boxes.

They worked through the books as fast as they could, as if they were on a timed mission.

This went on for about 20 minutes, and the presiding officer, Sujit Kumer Dey, looked helpless. After all, the police personnel were coordinating the BCL men's unlawful activities.

There was no protest from the polling agents either. How could they? All of them were working for the Hilsa symbol.

The police personnel on duty asked this correspondent not to stay at the centre for longer than five minutes.

"There is an order from the high-ups that journalists can stay inside only for five minutes," a policeman said.

By 9:20am, the BCL men walked out of the polling booths and were on their way to the next centre.

Many voters later told this correspondent that their votes were already cast, while some found their ballot papers completely missing.

At Dhanmondi Government Girls' High School around 12:40pm, a polling agent of Nasrin Begum, a candidate for the reserved seat of ward No. 14, 15 and 18, was seen filling ballot boxes with voting papers in the presence of an assistant presiding officer.

When this correspondent arrived, the door to the polling booth was shut, which is a violation of voting rules. The entry and the exit to polling centres or booths should remain open during the voting hours.

However, this correspondent was still privy to the goings-on inside the room through the window: a middle-aged person was seen folding the ballot papers and passing them on to another man, who was wearing an identity card of the Kettle symbol, for sticking them into the ballot boxes.

This correspondent also snapped photographs of the whole incident.

The men, upon learning that a journalist was present, opened the door.

It turns out the middle-aged person was the assistant presiding officer of the centre.

Soon, a plainclothes man, identifying himself as a policeman, approached this correspondent and asked him to leave the venue.

When this correspondent sought to speak to the presiding officer, the man removed him from the centre and took him to a policeman named Jamiul and said: "This person is a journalist and he took photographs. What should I do?"

The duo then asked this correspondent to delete whatever photographs he had taken.

Despite having the requisite permits to access the polling centre at all times, police still stopped two correspondents of The Daily Star when they wanted to enter Mirpur Bangla School and College, which was centre No. 145, around 9:30am.

After arguing for a while, they entered but the police did not allow the accompanying photographer in.

Police again intercepted them as they were speaking to the presiding officer, as one of the correspondents was filming the conversation on his mobile phone.

The law enforcers simply ousted the correspondents from the centre. "Our seniors have strictly instructed us not to allow any cameras or filming inside the venue," he said.

The police personnel, however, failed to show any proof of the instruction when the correspondents asked for one.

One of the correspondents returned to the venue at 2:30pm and saw the polling agent of the Table Clock symbol grabbing a bundle of ballot papers and stamping them in a corner of booth No. 1.

When the correspondent sought to know the number of votes cast until then, the polling officer asked him to come again at 3:15pm.

The correspondent returned at 3:45pm but found the booth empty. "All the votes were cast by 3:15pm," said Assistant Presiding Officer Golam Faruk.

At about 3:50pm, news floated that a magistrate was calling everyone in at the centre, and all those present, who happened to be just the BCL men and the polling officers, straight away got busy staging the scenes of a typical polling centre. Some became dummy agents and some voters.

At 1:35pm at Kabi Nazrul Govt College, a group of men, all supporters of Khokon, were seen stuffing voting papers into ballot boxes at a booth.

The Daily Star correspondent captured the scene on his mobile phone and the group ran towards him and intimidated him to delete the photos. More people arrived and forced the reporter to erase the photos in front of them.

The presence of voters was sparse at the centre, with agents and supporters of Khokon loitering about.

Voting at three centres at Suritola High School was seen

suspended when another correspondent of The Daily Star dropped by at 9:30am due to allegations of rigging.

Outside, people were shouting "vote thieves" after finding out that their votes were already cast.

"I came to cast my vote, but somebody has already done it. What do I do now?" said Aslam, a voter from the area.

At about 11:03am, ten men wearing the Hilsa symbol were seen stuffing ballots into boxes at Kamalapur Sher-e-Bangla Railway High School.

As The Daily Star correspondent attempted to photograph the scene, two of them shouted, "Don't take photos. You will be vanished as soon as you get out of here."

At the Kamalapur BRTC Bus Depot centre for men, police warned three journalists, including one from this newspaper, not to take mobile phones or cameras inside the venue.

"The Election Commission and our bosses instructed us not to allow journalists with mobile phones and cameras," said an on-duty policeman, who, however, was not wearing his name tag.

Voters returned without casting votes as police locked the Maniknagar Govt Primary School centre around 12 noon. Its presiding officer, Soheler Rahman Khan, said there was no atmosphere of voting at the centre.

The Scholastica School centre in Uttara was taken over by local AL leaders and their supporters as early as the first hour of voting.

Airport Thana AL Senior Vice-president Shahjahan Mondal along with his supporters was seen dictating the entire polling process, as the law enforcers played the role of silent onlookers.

Around 11:00am, batons in hand, supporters of the Hilsa symbol chased some voters of their opponent candidate out of Dhaka Nesaria Madrasa centre in Gendaria.

Later, a voter, Pappu, complained that he could not cast his vote as there was no ballot paper.

"I was told that my vote has already been cast," a woman said as she was coming out of Badda Girls High School at 1:30pm.

At around 2:00pm, five men of the Table Clock symbol were seen hurriedly stamping ballot papers at Shahjadpur Model Govt Primary School.

When the correspondent entered the booth, they told him not to disturb. "We are working here," one of them said and pushed the reporter out of the room and bolted it.

The correspondent then approached the group of policemen standing right outside the room. They said the election was going on smoothly, as none of the voters raised any complaint.

Its presiding officer, Jahangir Alam, said voting was going on well.

The reporter then moved to the nearby Badda Govt Primary School, where he saw a group of men sticking ballots into the boxes as quickly as possible.

As soon as they saw the correspondent, three of them weighed in and drove him out of the room.

Police locked the main gate of Shahjadpur Nazir Madrasa centre as 60-70 youths of the Table Clock symbol were rigging votes inside.

At that time, a voter carrying his national identity card attempted to enter the centre but he was not allowed. "I have been here three times since morning and was unsuccessful in casting my vote."

CHITTAGONG CITY CORPORATION
In Chittagong, at least 50 people were denied voting rights as AL men already cast their votes at Patenga Board Government Primary School between 8:00am and 1:00pm, according to The Daily Star correspondents based in the port city.

No voter was seen at Chittagong Shilpakala Academy centre at 2:30pm. A woman agent of AL-backed mayoral candidate was found to stamp ballot papers in presence of an assistant presiding officer.

As two reporters of The Daily Star appeared, she stopped and went back to her seat. The assistant presiding officer was silent.

BCL men threw stones at the Hossain Ahmedpara Government Primary School centre to take control of the venue.

Pro-government activists blasted crackers outside the polling centre at Government Commercial Institute at 10:10am.

Local AL men and outsiders forcibly entered the centre at Udayan Kindergarten at 9:00am and they barred The Daily Star correspondent from taking photographs.

AGENTS USED MOBILES
In a gross violation of electoral rules, the polling agents were seen using their mobile phones at every centre. They were constantly talking to each other and coordinating their activities.

For instance, at Dhaka College, the agents of Hilsa symbol were seen updating one another inside the booth.

No anomalies, no threat

FROM PAGE 1
Commission Secretariat in the evening.

He also said when some unwanted incidents occurred, the commission took steps immediately.

Voting was suspended at three centres in Dhaka South City Corporation as the situation there went beyond control. They are Kamalapur Sher-e-Bangla Railway High School, Ashraf Ali Khan Adarsha High School and Suritola Model Govt Primary School.

Cops look on

FROM PAGE 20
Bangabandhu Bidyaniketan centre. Had the army been deployed, they would not have been there," said a 65-year-old voter.

"If the army is not be deployed in future elections, I will not vote," the voter added.

A sub-inspector wishing anonymity said, "We have petty jobs. We do not have the courage to take any action against them as we have been instructed not to disturb them [AL-backed candidates' supporters]."

As a group of Chhatra League activists entered a polling booth, a sub-inspector at Kamalapur Sher-e-Bangla Railway High School centre was heard by The Daily Star correspondent say, "We're working for you people ... why do you need to go in?"

In many cases, the Election Commission's decision to keep the army inside cantonments as striking force raised questions.

Although The Daily Star yesterday witnessed at least 13 incidents of violence and clashes that left about 60 people injured, including three people shot, none of the three returning officers called for the army's help.

The chief election commissioner while briefing newsmen at the EC said the army is called in when law and order situation goes beyond the control of regular law enforcers.

Returning officer of Dhaka North City Corporation Shah Alam said he was in contact with the army but did not feel the need to call them in.

Similar views were expressed by the returning officers of Dhaka South City Corporation and Chittagong City Corporation polls.

VIOLENCE AND POLICE

In most incidents of violence and vote rigging during yesterday's polls, law enforcers looked the other way. They stepped in on a few occasions, but their actions appeared too little too late.

Flanked by his men, councillor candidate Golam Mostafa, who was running without AL endorsement, stormed the Bashabo Girls High School centre in Dhaka around 1:30pm. His men then opened fire.

Yasin Hasan Rabbi, 28, a reporter of news portal risingbd.com, among others, were shot. Yasin was shot in his right thigh and was rushed to Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Yasin said he saw policemen inside the centre but they did not act.

In Kamalapur Sher-e-Bangla High

school centre at 11:03am, police assaulted two polling agents of BNP-backed councillor candidate Ismail Hossain as the duo came out of their booths and drew their attention to the vote rigging going on inside.

The EC boss also urged all parties to accept the election results.

Talking to reporters at his EC Secretariat office around 10:30am, Election Commissioner Md Shah Nawaz said he had visited around 15 to 20 polling centres in the capital.

Later, additional police and Border Guard Bangladesh men brought the situation under control.

Two presiding officers of Dhanmondi and Pilkhana told The Daily Star that even though they had informed the higher authorities of ballot stuffing and sought additional forces, they did not get any positive response.

They said they were asked to suspend voting if need be.

Chanting "Joy Bangla" 40 to 50 supporters of a councillor candidate, who was running without his party AL's endorsement, stormed a booth of Uttar Kafrul High School and stuffed ballots.

Following this, around 200 leaders and activists of AL-blessed candidate Mahmuda Begum entered the booth and a clash broke out.

As police tried to break it up, the supporters of Mahmuda snatched two rifles of police and smashed them on the ground.

At least 22 people including the presiding officer of the centre were injured in the incident that also resulted in the suspension of voting for one and a half hours from 11:00am.

At Kalimullahbagh Govt Primary School, a clash between supporters of two councillor candidates around 10:30am resulted in the suspension of voting for around 15 minutes.

BGB personnel went to the scene after the clash.

Chases and counter chases between supporters of a BNP-backed councillor candidate and Chhatra League men in front of Badrunnesa Women's College for half an hour from 11:30am, created panic.

The councillor's supporters alleged that Chhatra League men smashed their tables and chairs thrice. They had placed them there for a booth to help voters find their way at the polling centre.

Nepal quake

FROM PAGE 20
As the prime minister said getting help to remote areas was a "major challenge", aid finally began reaching areas that had to fend for themselves since Saturday's quake.

In a televised address late yesterday, Koirala declared three days of national mourning for the 5,057 people known to have perished in Nepal alone.

More than 100 people died in neighbouring countries such as India and China.

Around 8,000 people had been injured while the United Nations estimated that eight million people had been affected.

"The government is doing all it can for rescue and relief on a war footing," Koirala said. "It is a challenge and a very difficult hour for Nepal."

In Jharibar, a village in the hilly Gorkha district of Nepal close to the quake's epicentre, Sunthalia dug for hours in the rubble of her collapsed home on Saturday to recover the bodies of two of her children, a 10-year-old daughter and eight-year-old son.

Another son aged four miraculously survived.

In Barpak, further north, rescue helicopters were unable to find a place to land. Soldiers yesterday had started to make their way overland, first by bus, then by foot.

Army helicopters also circled over Laprak, another village in the district best known as the home of Gurkha soldiers.

A local health official estimated and told Reuters that 1,600 of the 1,700 houses there had been razed. Helicopters dropped food packets in the hope that survivors could gather them up.

In Sindhupalchowk, about 3.5 hours by road northeast of Kathmandu, the earthquake was followed by landslides, killing 1,182 people and seriously injuring 376. A local official said he feared many more were trapped and more aid was needed.

Voting was being held peacefully everywhere except for one centre in Shuritola Primary School where the balloting has been suspended for an unwanted reason, he said.

Asked about several instances where journalists were barred from entering polling centres hours after voting began, he said, "I have directed the law enforcers to allow the media persons to discharge their duties without any hassles."

Rab personnel later on drove the Chhatra League men away.

Voting was suspended for two hours from 9:30am at Pogos School after a clash between the supporters of the AL-backed councillor candidate and the supporters of his party mate who was running for councillor without AL endorsement.

Police went for action after the clash. They clubbed and drove away the supporters of the unendorsed candidate.

A clash between the supporters of AL-blessed councillor candidate and an unendorsed AL candidate around 2:00pm panicked voters at Bulbul Lalitakala Academy.

Gunshots were heard here and voting was suspended for half an hour.

Preventing voters from entering the centre, Chhatra League activists started stuffing ballots for AL-backed councillor candidate at Kabi Nazrul Govt College centre around 10:00am.

Independent councillor candidate Hazi Md Selim went to the centre around 10:30am and was attacked for protesting. Swedish Ambassador Johan Friseel was trapped inside the centre at that time.

The clash there left several people injured. Police later stepped in and chased the supporters of Selim away.

Locals started vandalising in protest of ballot stuffing at three centres of Suritola Model Govt Primary School around 9:00am. Voting was suspended at two of the centres for three hours. Polling at the other was cancelled.

Police later charged truncheons to disperse the locals.

Many voters outside the centre alleged that their votes had been "cast" before the polling had even started.

AL men occupied the Maniknagar Model High School polling centre and stuffed ballots for over an hour.

Police were seen laid back. Aggrieved voters later locked in clash with police. Five people were injured here.

Supporters of AL-backed councillor candidate and the supporters of his rival candidate, also from AL, locked in clash at Al Jamia Mujahirul Ulum Madrasa centre in Chittagong yesterday morning.

In front of Govt Commercial Institute centre in Chittagong, chases and counter chases took place around 10:10am and homemade bombs were exploded when supporters of two candidates were involved in a clash.

Heavy rain late yesterday slowed the rescue work.

In the capital, as elsewhere, thousands have been sleeping on pavements, roads and in parks, many under makeshift tents.

Hospitals are full to overflowing, while water, food and power are scarce.

There were some signs of normality returning yesterday, with fruit vendors setting up stalls on major roads and public buses back in operation.

Officials acknowledged that they were overwhelmed by the scale of the disaster.

"The big challenge is relief," said Chief Secretary Leela Mani Paudel, Nepal's top bureaucrat. "We are really desperate for more foreign expertise to pull through this crisis."

Brave officer

FROM PAGE 20
the altercation. The Chhatra League kept on mounting pressure on him but the officer would not budge.

At one stage, the Chhatra League went out and called their cohorts who were outside the polling centre. They fired several shots in the air scaring voters. They were wielding firearms and sharp weapons 300-400 meters away from the polling centre.

Policemen later chased them away and called in additional forces.

Three other presiding officers of polling centre-340, -342 and -343 of the school were also able to ward off the ruling party men.

At polling centre-340, a total of 629 votes were cast of 2,525. AL-backed mayor candidate AJM Nasir Uddin got 186 votes while BNP-blessed M Manjur Alam received 376 votes, said Rezwunul Hoque, presiding officer of the polling centre.

Nasir got 393 votes and Manjur got 627 votes at polling centre-343, said presiding officer Prof Arun Bikash Barua, adding that of the 2,423 voters, 1,097 had cast their votes.