

Dialogue with US begins today

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Two top US diplomats arrive in Dhaka this morning to hold discussion with the country's top political leaders and senior government officials. The current political situation is likely to figure at the discussions.

The two are US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman and Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Desai Biswal. They are coming here on a two-day visit to attend the 4th Bangladesh-US Partnership Dialogue beginning this morning.

Diplomatic sources said though the US diplomats are coming here mainly for attending the annual partnership dialogue, prolonged political crisis in Bangladesh and the city corporation polls in Dhaka and Chittagong will also come up on the sidelines meetings.

Partnership dialogue is the premier forum for further expanding and deepening cooperation on bilateral and regional issues.

The US has expressed disappointment by "widespread" reports of vote-rigging in Tuesday's city polls in Dhaka and Chittagong. It has also called for a

transparent investigation into the allegations of election irregularities.

A highly placed source yesterday told The Daily Star that Sherman and Biswal are also expected to call on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia.

During the expected meetings, the US officials are likely to convey the message of the Obama administration that asks to find a peaceful resolution to the political crisis in Bangladesh to the two leaders.

At the partnership dialogue, Sherman and Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque will lead their countries' delegations.

The meeting will focus on the expansion of security, trade, investment and development ties between the two countries.

Issues related to labour, regional connectivity, climate change, counter-terrorism and food security will also come up during the dialogue.

Official sources said Dhaka would ask the US side to take a considerate view in the next Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) review for Bangladesh as the country has already implemented most of the preconditions in the "Bangladesh Action Plan 2013".



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina comforts a person affected by the arson attacks carried out during the BNP-led 20-party's blockade that began on January 6. She handed over cheques to some of the victims at the Prime Minister's Office yesterday.

PHOTO: PMO

Nepal quake victim rescued

FROM PAGE 1

that has killed more than 5,000 people.

"He said that the walls just started crumbling, and there was nothing he could do. His leg was stuck and he was trapped," Bhattarai told AFP on Wednesday.

"He said he was so thirsty that he even drank his own urine, there was nothing else, no option," Bhattarai said as he waited at Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital for Khanal to return from surgery on his leg.

From beneath the rubble, Khanal had called Bhattarai to plead for help.

But Khanal, who has a wife and a six-month-old baby and lives in Arghakhanchi district, had forgotten the name of the hotel where he had been staying since last Thursday.

"You won't believe it, but we could reach him on his phone even after two

days," Bhattarai said.

"I'm trapped here' he said, but in panic he forgot the hotel's name. If he had remembered, maybe we would have found him earlier."

Bhattarai said the phone later went dead, sparking a desperate search of overwhelmed hospitals and mortuaries in the devastated capital.

"We looked everywhere, we went to all the hospitals. Checked patients and even the dead. We had lost all hope of finding him."

"Luck saved him, it's like he has a second life. Everybody else is dead," said Bhattarai.

"He was conscious when he was rescued... he said 'Oh God, thank you'."

"His wife was very relieved when we called her."

Like thousands of other young men who leave impoverished Nepal for work in the Gulf, Khanal had been

scheduled to fly to Dubai on Sunday to start at a KFC outlet.

International rescue teams, some using sniffer dogs, have been racing against the clock to find survivors trapped in the rubble of houses and other buildings.

The government acknowledged it had been overwhelmed by the devastation from the deadliest quake in Nepal in over 80 years.

Around 8,000 people were injured while the United Nations estimates that eight million people have been affected.

Hospital chief administrator Parashu Ram Koirala said that apart from the leg injury, Khanal's condition was not thought to be serious.

"When they rescued him, he was conscious and he has been fine otherwise. We are operating on him right now," Koirala told AFP.

"He is very lucky to be alive."

Only cheer

FROM PAGE 1

south, campaigned for her husband, an accused in several cases, all along.

Over the 21 days of electioneering, the candidates backed by the AL, the BNP and other parties showed tolerance towards their rivals, and refrained from lambasting one another.

The mayoral aspirants rather focused on city problems and came up with solutions.

In the previous elections, people witnessed violent street battles between supporters of rival candidates. But this time, the candidates and their supporters didn't indulge in such acts.

The exceptions were the attacks on the motorcade of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and on mayoral candidate in Dhaka north Mahi B Chowdhury, also joint secretary general of Bikolpodhara Bangladesh.

AL-backed mayoral candidates Annisul Huq and Sayeed Khokon condemned the attack on Khaleda's motorcade even after the identities of the attackers were exposed by the media.

Annisul went to see Mahi at a city hospital after he came under attack in the early hours of Sunday.

The mayoral candidates were respectful of each other while carrying out campaigns.

Addressing his rival Mirza Abbas as uncle during an election campaign in Dhaka south, Sayeed Khokon told voters, "You saw Abbas chacha [uncle] as mayor ... Now give me a chance."

Mirza Abbas' wife Afroza Abbas paid a sudden visit to Khokon's house and sought vote for her husband. Khokon also had plans to visit Abbas' house, but couldn't make it.

Morning promised good day

FROM PAGE 1

city corporations and Chittagong city corporation was around 44 percent, an official of the Election Commission told The Daily Star yesterday.

Figures from Tuesday's polls showed that the AL-backed mayoral candidate won by a 20 percentage-point margin.

Almost the same margin was visible between mayoral hopefuls in the highly competitive polls to four city corporations -- Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal and Sylhet -- held in 2013.

In Rajshahi and Khulna, BNP-backed mayoral aspirants defeated their rivals blessed by the AL with the margin of 22 and 20 percentage points respectively.

It explains why political analysts believe Tuesday's voting results left a significant message to us, particularly to the government.

"The Awami League and the government have been claiming that people have rejected the BNP for its mindless violence in the last three months since January. But the vote that the BNP-supported candidates received proved the claim wrong," said M Hafizuddin Khan, a former adviser to a caretaker government.

"The government should take Tuesday's voting results into consideration and it should no more neglect the BNP. The government must come

VOTES IN TUESDAY'S POLLS	
AL-backed candidates: 55.43%	BNP-backed candidates: 34.83%
PREVIOUS CITY ELECTIONS	
RAJSHAHI CITY POLLS:	
AL-backed candidates: 38%	BNP-backed candidates: 60%
KHULNA CITY POLLS:	
AL-backed candidates: 39%	BNP-backed candidates: 59%
BARISAL CITY POLLS:	
AL-backed candidates: 43%	BNP-backed candidates: 54%
SYLHET CITY POLLS:	
AL-backed candidates: 33%	BNP-backed candidates: 50%
GAZIPUR CITY POLLS:	
AL-backed candidates: 39%	BNP-backed candidates: 55%

to an understanding with the BNP," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Prof Nizam Ahmed, a parliament

ary affairs expert, echoed similar views.

"The polls have sent a clear message to the government. It should not underestimate the BNP," said Prof Nizam, a teacher at Chittagong University.

Former chief election commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda, however, thinks the city polls raised hope for putting the country's politics back on the right track.

"But the way the polls were held has diminished the hope," he told The Daily Star.

Tuesday's polls are another example of how an election mired in allegations of rigging hurts the electoral system.

The electoral system was crippled in the one-sided January 5 parliamentary election last year. The upazila parishad elections in February-March in the same year, which were allegedly manipulated by the ruling party men, sent another fresh blow to the electoral system.

Political analysts believe electoral democracy is considered as the first step towards substantive democracy.

As M Hafizuddin Khan, Prof Nizam Ahmed and ATM Shamsul Huda have opined, the way the electoral democracy was damaged in Tuesday's polls has further diminished democracy in the country.

Not credible

FROM PAGE 1

stuffing took place at 55 centres in Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), 46 in Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) and 37 in Chittagong City Corporation (CCC). Similarly, violent incidents were observed at 66, 26 and 72 centres in DSCC, DNCC and CCC respectively.

Protests or objection by polling agents was filed during counting votes at 12 percent of the observed stations in DSCC, 5 percent in DNCC and 21 percent in CCC, while poll results were not displayed as per law at 14 percent stations, said the polls monitoring network.

The group alleges that 26 of its observers were not allowed to enter polling stations, 37 were ousted from vote centres, 138 were not allowed to observe counting and two were beaten up in DSCC.

The group further alleges that it applied to the Election Commission (EC) for allowing 1,700 observers, but the commission approved 1,414 and issued cards to only 828 without giving any explanation.

Nazmul Ahsan Kalimullah, steering committee member and founder of Election Observation Council, said law enforcers were vigilant on the roads but were not equally active on the premises or inside the poll centres.

In reply to questions from journalists about EC's role, he said, "We cannot comment on it without observing what steps they take regarding re-election after investigating the allegations that have surfaced so far."

However, Sharmin Murshid, chief executive officer of Brotee, a civil society organisation, expressed disappointment at EC's role.

"The EC did a poor job of keeping sanctity of the electoral environment. I did not get the feeling that they were keeping vigil," she observed.

The Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has also criticised the role of EC and law enforcers and boycotting of the polls. It also condemned widespread rigging, violence and creating obstruction for voters, observers and journalists as allegedly happened in a number of centres.

In a press statement, TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said, "Acceptability of the three city corporation elections is in question because of irregularities that took place under political shelter and muscle power."

"The EC not only failed to carry out its duty but also ruined the image and public trust of this constitutional

institution because of its politically biased attitude," he observed.

Mayoral candidate Zonayed Saki has meanwhile termed the election a farce staged in connivance with the EC, ruling party goons and police.

He alleged polling stations had turned entertainment centre for ruling party's supporters after 10:00am.

"By afternoon they [ruling party supporters] ousted 600 of our polling agents. They also pretended to be agents of other parties' candidates," he alleged.

Saki also alleged that the EC had cooked up the voting results as per the government's order.

UN, EU for probe

FROM PAGE 1
general was aware of the BNP's decision to boycott the Dhaka and Chittagong city polls amid allegations of electoral fraud.

"He [Ban] appeals to all parties to express their differences through peaceful means," the spokesman said, adding that the secretary general reiterated his call on all political leaders to find a peaceful resolution to the current situation.

On April 4 and 22, Ban said he was encouraged by the opposition's decision to participate in the city corporation polls and appealed to the authorities in all relevant institutions to ensure that the elections would be transparent, inclusive, and credible.

Expressing disappointment over the city corporation polls held on Tuesday, the US and the UK have called for a swift, impartial and transparent investigation into the allegations of election irregularities.

THE EU STATEMENT
In a statement yesterday, the EU spokesperson urged all concerned to engage in a constructive manner for the long-term stability and democratic development of the country.

On the city elections, it said, "There are credible reports that vote-rigging, intimidation and violence have marred the elections in Dhaka and Chittagong on 28 April, despite the calls from the international community to peaceful, inclusive and transparent elections."

The BNP made a late decision to boycott these elections. Voters were not given an opportunity to express fully their democratic choice, said the statement.

"Irregularities and acts of violence must now be thoroughly investigated. The EU expects all political actors to refrain from violence, de-escalate tensions and engage in a constructive manner for the long-term stability and

City election

FROM PAGE 1

vote, let me put ink on your finger. But you don't need to cast vote." The flabbergasted student walked away without further exchange.

Secondly, we have lost a chance for political reconciliation. The way the election was brazenly bulldozed only shows how little the government could care about BNP or for that matter for any opposition party.

Thirdly, we have lost credibility of the election commission, a vital pillar for any democracy. Although the news channels and social media were flooded with numerous video clips and pictures of vote rigging and intimidation, the CEC, Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad, could not find anything wrong. He thought the nation a bunch of fools when he thanked all for a "free and fair" election. He did not bother to think how low his own standing fell when he uttered those partisan words live on TV.

Fourthly, we have lost a chance for our law enforcement agencies to be neutral in an election under a political government. The way police drove away BNP agents and blocked the media from covering the rigging, it only showed how much immunity they enjoy from this government. In future, why should they bother caring about political rights or human rights? Having a reckless law enforcement agency is a big threat to the society.

Fifthly, it is the media that has lost its battle. There was this belief that media vigil would prevent any voting anomalies. But that was proven wrong. The way media persons were intimidated and attacked by the ruling party men was unprecedented. Reporters and photographers were barred from taking pictures. We have only heard from them their horror stories.

And finally, it is democracy that has suffered a defeat. The winners could be Annisul Huq and Sayeed Khokon, but the losers are the people of Bangladesh.

Correction

The Daily Star in its Tuesday's issue carried the photo of daily Jugantor journalist Obayed Anghuman after he had been assaulted. But by mistake he was mentioned in the caption as Shamim Noor. We apologise for our inadvertent mistake and the inconvenience it may have caused.



JP candidates

FROM PAGE 1

Sheth got 6,131 votes out of 8.68 lakh vote cast.

The JP leaders, however, might have some solace in seeing the results of other mayor aspirants who lost their security deposits too.

IN DNCC

Mahi B Chowdhury, son of former president AQM Badruddozza Chowdhury, the Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh leader, managed to bag only 13, 407 in the DNCC.

Abdullah Al Kafee, a candidate backed by CPB-BSD, secured only 2,475 votes.

Gono Sanghati Andolan-backed candidate Zonayed Saki got only 7,370.

TV star Nader Chowdhury, who got support of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, got 1,412 votes.

Candidates Sheikh Md Fazle Bari Masud got 18,050, AYM Kamrul Islam 1,216, Kazi Mohammad Shahidullah 2,968, Chowdhury Irad Ahmed Siddiqui 915, Moazzem Hossain Khan Majlish 1,095, Anisuzzaman Khokon 900, Zaman Bhuiyan 1,140, Shamsul Alam Chowdhury 982 and Sheikh Shahiduzzaman got 923 votes.

They all have lost their security deposits.

IN DSCC

AL former MP Ghulam Mawla Rony managed to get only 1,887 votes while Bazlur Rashid Feroz, a candidate backed by CPB-BSD, got only 1,029 votes.

Abu Naser Muhammad Masud Hossain got 2,197, ASM Akram 682, Mohammad Ayub Hussein 354, ASM Asaduzzaman Ripon 928, Dilip Bhodro 669, Mashur Rahman 508, Mohammad Shafi Ullah Chowdhury 512, Akhtaruzzaman 362, Abdur Rahman 14,784, Abdul Khalek 550, Zahidur Rahman 988, Baharaine Sultan Bahar 312 and Rezaul Karim Chowdhury secured 2,173 votes.

All of them have lost their security deposits.

IN CCC

Arif Moinuddin got 1,774, MA Matin 11,655, Shafiqul Alam 680, Abdul Kalim Azad 1,385, Alauddin Chowdhury 2,159, Wajed Hossain Bhuiyan 9,668, Saifuddin Ahmed Robi 2,661, Syed Sajjad Zoha 845 and Husein Mohammad Mujibul Haq got 4,215 votes.

They have lost their security deposits.

City polls free, fair

FROM PAGE 1

"Considering everything, it can be said the city corporation elections were very much fair except for some stray incidents... we'll surely investigate these incidents," she said.

She also criticised the media's role in the election, particularly "for their sympathy to the militants and terrorists" who killed hundreds of people in the name of movement since January 5.

"The media should play a role against terrorists... they should play their role in favour of people, peace and security," the PM said.

There were some incidents in some polling centres, but the ratio was very insignificant, she said, adding, "If we consider the other polls that took place during Khaleda Zia's government, these elections were very much free and fair."

The PM also said the residents of three city corporations had rejected the BNP-Jamaat alliance for their subversive, militant and terrorist activities in the recent past.

She thanked voters, the Election Commission, law-enforcement agencies and all others concerned for holding a peaceful election.

About the BNP's election boycott, Hasina said, "This was very much unfortunate. The voting started at 8:00am. But without any reason they pulled out from the election stating irregularities and rigging."

"But they couldn't identify any centre. This was totally false allegation and it was planned... this was done to tarnish the country's image."

She also said in just a couple of hours Mirza Abbas of Dhaka south got 2,94,291 while Tabitha Awal in

Dhaka north got 3,25,080 votes. "If there was any irregularity or rigging how did they get such huge votes in just a couple of hours."

The PM mentioned that the allegations were intended to hamper the democratic system of the country as it was moving forward on the democratic path.

"Many quarters do not want democracy to prevail in the country and people develop their socio-economic condition...," she said.

Earlier at another programme at the PMO, Hasina said the city polls were held in a fair and peaceful manner and the people of Dhaka and Chittagong rejected the BNP.

"The residents of Dhaka and Chittagong have rejected them [through the city polls] and the country's people will also reject them [BNP] in the future," she added.