

AL responsible for BNP's polls boycott

Khaleda says at meeting with lawyers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP-backed candidates wanted to stay in the city elections until the end, but Awami League men by intimidating polling agents and capturing polling stations made them boycott the polls, Khaleda Zia was quoted as saying last night.

The BNP chief was holding a closed-door meeting with around a hundred pro-BNP lawyers at her Gulshan office. No media was allowed to cover the meeting. However, a number of meeting participants told this correspondent about her statement.

"Within hours after the voting opened, Awami League cadres drove our polling agents out of all the voting centres. The Election Commission did nothing to this end. We had no alternative to boycotting the polls," Khaleda's adviser Ahmed Aazam Khan, who was present at the meeting, quoted her as saying.

"If we had not participated in the polls, people and the international community would have misunder-

stood us. But now they realised why we boycotted the January 5 national elections."

Khaleda was also quoted by pro-BNP lawyer Sanaullah Mia as saying: "Ruling party's capturing polling stations and rigging votes have once again proved that our decision not to participate in the national election was right."

"It has also been proved that a free, fair and inclusive election is not possible under the present government."

The BNP chief alleged that police, Rab and BGB personnel had assisted the ruling party men in capturing some polling stations and stuffing ballot box.

Also yesterday, senior BNP leader Brig Gen (retd) ASM Hannan Shah said the party demanded the Election Commission cancel the April 28 polls results and hold city corporation elections afresh.

He was talking to reporters after placing wreaths at the grave of former president Ziaur Rahman in the capital, marking the founding anniversary of the party's labour front Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal.

EC is not a postbox

FROM PAGE 1

Mahmudul Islam in his book "Constitutional Law of Bangladesh" writes "The Constitution does not envisage anything else than free and fair election and any law which stifles the hand of the Election Commission in ensuring free and fair polls will not pass the test of Constitutionality."

The Appellate Division of the Supreme Court in Noor Hossain versus Nazrul Islam case observed: "We cannot but reiterate that if there was contemporaneous report of allegations about disturbance, rigging of ballot papers or election not being held justly, honestly and fairly then after being satisfied about the correctness of the report or allegations Election Commission would be justified to cancel the result of the election and direct re-poll."

The EC's authority has also been set out in the Local Government (City Corporation) Election Rules 2010.

The rules give the EC ample powers to resist any sort of irregularity in the polls. If it appears to the EC that it will not be possible to hold the polls in a free and fair manner due to use of muscle power, intimidation, capture of polling centres and ballot stuffing, it can suspend voting in any polling station. Even the EC can suspend the entire voting, meaning suspend the entire election.

Moreover, the rules provide the EC with the powers to cancel candidature on grounds of gross electoral anomalies. A candidate personally need not violate any electoral law to be punished. Under this provision the onus is on the candidate for the unlawful activities of his election agents and activists.

But the EC kept its claws sheathed rather than use them to hold free and fair elections in the three city corporations. Kazi Rakibuddin's predecessors have, however, exercised the EC's powers and set some good precedents.

MA Syed set the first precedent by cancelling an election of a municipality in 2004.

23 rescued

FROM PAGE 1

Nurul Alam, 35, Rani Palit, 23, and Aman Ullah, 24, were arrested from the building on human trafficking charges, said Mohiuddin Mahmud, officer-in-charge of Panchlaish Police Station.

The victims are from Brahmanbaria, Sherpur, Habiganj, Satkhira and Jhenidah.

One of the victims, Ataur Rahman, 22, of Brahmanbaria, said a broker, Aman Ullah, had contacted him over the phone a few days ago and offered him a job in Malaysia in exchange for Tk 2 lakh.

"I agreed as Aman said I need to pay him the money only after reaching Malaysia", said Ataur, who came to Chittagong on Friday on Aman's instruction.

Another police official said the rescued victims were scheduled to leave for Malaysia from Firingi Bazar of Chittagong.

During preliminary interrogation, the arrestees confessed to their involvement in human trafficking, said Jahid, second officer of the police station.

A case was filed.

In another drive around 1:30am, Banshkhali police rescued 12 other fortune seekers from two houses in Khudukkhali village.

"They were kept there to be trafficked to Malaysia," said Swapan Kumar Mazumdar, officer-in-charge of Banshkhali Police Station. No one was detained, he said.

Three of the 12 rescued victims were from Cox's Bazar, while the others from Sylhet and Narsingdi, the police official added.

Each of them had given Tk one lakh to Tk 1.6 lakh to the brokers to go to Malaysia, the police said, quoting the victims.

In Daulatkhan municipality of Bhola -- chairman and ward commissioners--all of whom belonged to the then ruling BNP, were elected uncontested as they did not allow anyone outside of their party to file nomination to contest the election.

The EC led by Syed did not publish the election results in official gazette. It started a probe into the allegation of exercising muscle power in the polls.

After the investigation, it cancelled the election results and held fresh polls there.

Another incident had annoyed the EC led by Syed. At the end of 2001, the then ruling BNP men had foiled a municipality election in Sandwip of Chittagong by preventing voters from casting ballots. Not a single vote was cast. The then ruling BNP men had seen to it as none of them was contesting.

The EC probed the incident and decided to hold the polls by deploying army. The election was not held later following a court stay order.

In 2009, the then EC led by ATM Shamsul Huda had also kept the results of 33 upazila polls withheld over allegations of anomalies.

Kazi Rakibuddin, however, has been operating differently from the very beginning.

Under his leadership the EC has never decided to keep the results of any election withheld to probe allegations of polls anomaly.

Earlier, it did not take much time to publish the results of January 5 parliamentary election and upazila parishad polls held in 2014 despite allegations of ballot box stuffing.

The EC has just kept publishing the results in official gazette after the returning officers sent the consolidated results. In so doing, it has made itself the "post-box" of Justice Aziz.

Hasina

FROM PAGE 1

was not a single causality in the polls, which was rare in the history of Bangladesh," the PM said.

Hasina discussed the city polls environment during a meeting with visiting US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman who called on her at Gono Bhaban on Thursday night.

On Friday, speaking at a joint press conference on the outcome of the two-day fourth US-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue, Sherman stressed the need for a transparent investigation into electoral irregularities.

Expressing disappointments both at the irregularities in the city corporation elections and BNP's boycott midway through, Sherman said the focus must now be on a transparent investigation to make sure that the next election was "highly improved".

"We remain focused on a long-term solution that accommodates all parties and allows the Bangladeshi people to peacefully express their views," said the US diplomat.

"I think what everyone needs to focus on [is] how the next election is highly improved and that is very important for democracy," she said.

The issue of polls irregularities also came up in the discussion between Sherman and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia when the former went to meet the BNP chief at her Gulshan residence on Friday.

However, when journalists asked BNP standing committee member Abdul Moyeen Khan, a meeting participant, what Sherman told Khaleda regarding the April 28 city corporation elections, Moyeen said the US delegation had already expressed their views very clearly in writing.

Meanwhile, another BNP standing committee member Brig Gen (retd) ASM Hannan Shah told newsmen yesterday that the BNP demanded the Election Commission cancel the April 28 elections and hold fresh polls.



Two children watch as fishermen start catching hilsa in the Padma river in Chandpur on Friday. The two-month ban on hilsa fishing ended on May Day.

PHOTO: STAR

Cattle trader shot dead by BSF

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Indian Border Security Force (BSF) shot dead a Bangladeshi cattle trader on Dharmajain border in Biral upazila early Friday.

The dead, Abdur Razzak, 44, was the son of late Habibur Rahman of Bonbari village in Thakurgaon's Haripur upazila.

Locals said Razzak along with other cattle traders entered India through Dharmajain border early Friday. The BSF men of Gangarampur in Dakshin Dinajpur district opened fire on Razzak when he was returning home along with cattle around 4:30am. Razzak died on the spot.

The BSF took the body inside Indian territory and handed it over to Gangarampur police later.

Jamal Hossain, commanding officer of BCB Dinajpur-2 Battalion, confirmed the incident. He said the BGB had strongly protested the killing.

At a flag meeting yesterday morning, the BSF said they would return the body, the BGB official said.

As sweet as win

FROM PAGE 1

206 by Tamim Iqbal and an equally important 150 by Imrul Kayes, for a long, long time.

Tamim's first double-century after skipper Mushfiqur Rahim's 200 at Galle against Sri Lanka in yet another creditable drawn encounter three years ago, was the cornerstone in Bangladesh's spectacular comeback story in Khulna, where the home side were up against a massive task of saving the match after Pakistan took a very impressive 296-run first innings lead in the fourth morning.

If Tamim was the hero then Imrul was the best supporting actor with a magnificent career-best 150. The pair not only surprised Pakistan when they batted out the whole two sessions on the fourth day and produced a never-seen-before 273 runs for the undefeated first wicket, but also safely negotiated the first hour of the fifth morning before rain stopped play at 11.30am, forcing an early lunch.

By that time they took the total to 312, a world record opening partnership in the second innings, beating England's Colin Cowdrey and Geoff Pullar's 290 against South Africa in

1960.

Imrul, who defied the pain barrier of standing behind the wicket for 120 odd overs in place of injured Mushfiqur and then straightway opened the innings with Tamim, pushed his overnight 132 to 150 off 240 balls. The southpaw struck 16 fours and three sixes in his seven-hour odyssey at the wicket before holing out in the deep off Zulfiqar Babar.

Tamim's master-class 278-ball 206 that featured 17 fours and four sixes was something Mushfiqur described as 'a privilege to watch' and according to Pakistan captain Misbahul Haq 'a counter attack that took the game away from their firm grip' that won the left-hander the player-of-the-match award ahead of Mohammad Hafeez's brilliant 224.

Tamim reached his first double-hundred in some style. Standing on 182, the left-hander suddenly realised that it was time to step up a gear and moved to 195 with consecutive straight sixes followed by a single against leg-spinner Yasir Shah. In the next over bowled by left-arm pacer Junaid Khan, Tamim disdainfully smashed another one, the impact was

the same -- a six over the bowler's head. Tamim was out stumped off Hafeez but received all the respect from the opposition players and a standing ovation on his way back to the dressing room after playing arguably the best knock by a Bangladeshi on a Test field.

When he got out, Bangladesh looked safe enough at 399 for 3 and Mominul Haque (21) and Mahmudhllah Riyad (40) took the score to 451 at the tea break. And as it has always been the case, the final session looked a bit interesting when Mominul and Mushfiqur, who scored a five-ball duck, returned to the dressing room in quick succession. But Shakib Al Hasan stood firm at the other end and remained unbeaten on 76 when both captains agreed for a draw with Bangladesh going strong at 555 for 6.

And if someone wants to sum up the mood in that final hour of this Test, just revisit the verbal exchange between Pakistan's left-arm pacer Wahab Riaz and Shakib. It was a battle so common for Pakistan against any other team. But this is something new for Bangladesh and they are enjoying every bit of it.

Free after nine months in hell

FROM PAGE 1

province, and rescued Anuzar (as spelt by Phuket Wan). He had been left there for dead. He is now in a local hospital and stable.

Nearby were two bodies, abandoned above ground, and what appeared to be about 30 more bodies hidden in shallow graves. The camp is said to be located just 300 metres from Thailand's border with Malaysia.

Anuzar, looking hungry and with wasted muscles, at Pedang Besar Hospital said the dead had mostly been held in the camp for longer than his nine-month period of captivity.

"We were the people who could not pay the ransom; so they kept us and did not really care whether we lived or died," he said.

A police guard has been placed near Anuzar's bedside. As a survivor, he may

one day play a key role in testifying against the traffickers.

Authorities in Friday's raid involving 200 police, soldiers and paramedics found 39 shanty shacks with one roughly built tower that could have enabled a guard to overlook the camp's perimeter.

Police believe the traffickers abandoned the camp two days ago, possibly fleeing with able-bodied women and men who had more value than Anuzar.

At times, up to 1,000 people could be held in the camp, he said.

"Eight brokers controlled the camp," Anuzar said. "I knew three well -- Ahmed Ali, Anwar and Sorim-Ida. Some are Rohingya, some are Malaysian."

He said he believed 10 Bangladeshis were among the dead scattered near the camp, along with at least 30 Rohingya.

"I know three Bangladeshis --

Usaman, Belawa and Sahid -- are among the dead," said Anuzar, who hails from Narsingdi, but says he was abducted in Cox's Bazar.

More Bangladeshis have joined Rohingya in the boats because some are enticed to seek better jobs in Malaysia. Others say they are abduction victims who had no intention of leaving their homeland.

The human trafficking industry from Burma and Bangladesh has grown and is now so lucrative that purpose-adapted trawlers are carrying cargoes of hundreds of people, not fish.

"Most of us have been beaten or abused," Anuzar said. "In the camp, we were never able to get enough food or water. Showering seldom happened."

The camp was "like a village," he said. He hopes to get in touch as soon as possible with his mother Manucha.

Meanwhile, the AFP reported that there is a second person rescued alive.

Doctors say that the second man is around 35-years-old. Anuzar and the older man were suffering from a range of ailments.

"Both are malnourished, have scabies and lice," doctor Kwanwilai Chotpitchayanku told AFP at Padang Besar hospital.

"The older man could not walk, he had to be carried off the mountain. He had not eaten anything for two days before he was found. He told the translator he had a fever in the jungle for two months."

Doctors said the man had not been fully identified but was from either Bangladesh or Myanmar.

Both men were rigged to IV drips and were frail despite their young ages, according to an AFP reporter.

Mass grave site in Thai jungle

FROM PAGE 1

after the site was found on Friday, told AFP, saying it was unclear how they had died.

"It is believed that the graves were of those who died during the journey."

Throughout yesterday, Thai forensic teams dug out badly decayed skeletons from shallow graves covered by bamboo and a few feet of dirt, according to an AFP reporter.

"In total, we have 26 bodies. As far as I know one is a woman. We still cannot tell the cause of their deaths," head of the forensic team Police General Jarumporn Suramaneet told AFP after their search ended yesterday.

Thailand's police chief has described the site as a "virtual prison camp" where migrants were held in makeshift bamboo cages.

Two survivors were rescued from the camp and they were taking treatment at a local hospital at Pedang Besar. They told doctors they had spent months at the camp despite falling sick and having little to eat.

"Both are malnourished, have scabies and lice," said Kwanwilai Chotpitchayanku, a physician.

"The older man could not walk, he had to be carried off the mountain. He hadn't eaten anything for two days before he was found. He told the translator he had a fever in the jungle for two months."

Doctors said the men had not been fully identified.

Local news portal Phuketwan reported that one of the survivors was identified as Anuzar, 28, a Bangladeshi, who said he had been abducted from Cox's Bazaar but had no money to pay a ransom. He was abandoned there for nine months.

Minister (consular) Esheshamul Haque of Bangladesh embassy in Thailand said discovery of such graves is unprecedented.

He told The Daily Star over the phone that they were seeking consular access to the survivors before taking the next step.

After finding of the graves, Human Rights Watch (HRW), meanwhile, demanded an independent, United Nations-assisted investigation and bringing those responsible to justice.

"Trafficking of persons in Thailand has long been out of control, something that senior officials have admitted to Human Rights Watch and others," said Brad Adams, Asia director of HRW.

In January, Thai authorities confirmed that more than a dozen government officials -- including senior policemen and a navy officer -- were being prosecuted for involvement or complicity in human trafficking.

In June last year, the United States dumped Thailand to the bottom of its

list of countries accused of failing to tackle "modern-day slavery".

DANGEROUS CROSSINGS

According to the UN Refugee agency, as many as 87,000 people embarked on voyages to Malaysia from Myanmar and Bangladesh since 2012. The rate of maritime migration rose by 61 percent in a year ending in June 2014.

The Daily Star investigation found trafficking gangs having networks in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia are engaged in the multi-billion-dollar trade.

Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims -- described by the UN as one of the world's most persecuted minority communities -- and poor jobseekers of Bangladesh fall prey to the gangs being lured of lucrative jobs in Malaysia.

In Bangladesh, jobseekers from different districts are taken first to Teknaf of Cox's Bazar and then to cargo ships in deep sea by small engine boats in the dark of night.

After a perilous journey through the Bay of Bengal, they reach the Thai jungle camps and held captive for ransom ranging from Tk 2 lakh to 3 lakh.

The migrants are not released until the Thai captors are confirmed that traffickers in Bangladesh have received the ransom from the victims' families.

Those failing to pay the money are abandoned in the jungle camps or sold

to the Thai fishing industry. Many also end up in Thai jails and are eventually deported. Many languish in the jail for months and even years.

Last week, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon described the condition of such camps as "untenable", adding that their existence should "remain a matter of profound concern for the international community".

Switching tactics

Chris Lewa of Arakan Project that monitors the trafficking route said the Thai junta's crackdown had forced many Thai smugglers into hiding, reducing the numbers held in jungle camps in recent months.

But smugglers have simply switched tactics, she said, keeping desperate migrants in rickety boats at sea for endless weeks.

"We fear there may be thousands stuck at sea because they can't disembark. The camps have effectively been transferred from the jungle to international waters," she told AFP.

Two weeks ago, she interviewed a 15-year-old boy who had made it to Malaysia.

Rather than hold him in a Thai jungle camp, he was kept for six weeks on a boat, awaiting payment from his relatives.

"During his time at sea, he said he saw at least 30 people die. They were thrown overboard," he said.