

US, UK update travel alert

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The US Embassy in Dhaka yesterday warned US citizens of "possible attacks" on the capital's hotels and clubs, especially during the New Year's Eve celebrations.

In a security message on its official website, the embassy reminded US citizens that there was an active "Travel Alert for Bangladesh" issued on November 10 and a "Worldwide Travel Alert" on November 23.

It also referred to Dhaka Metropolitan Police's announcement of increased security measures, including a prohibition on outdoor parties after 8:00pm on December 31.

The embassy advised US citizens to remain alert during travel, and avoid large crowds and crowded places.

The United Kingdom also issued travel advice for its citizens with reference to the US Embassy message.

Yemen faculties shut for mixing of sexes

AFP, Aden

Radical Islamist gunmen shut down three faculties at Yemen's University of Aden yesterday in an attempt to force students to observe segregation of the sexes on campus, witnesses said.

The incident was the second of its kind in recent weeks in Aden, Yemen's second city, where the presence of jihadist groups is growing as the embattled government struggles to spread control.

The gunmen, some of whom were masked, forced the students out of the faculties of administrative sciences, law, and engineering, before locking down the gates, students said.

"They dragged us out of the exam halls," said one of the students. "They detained two students who were filming the incident."

Students said the gunmen shouted: "No mixing. We have warned you before," and added that the authorities did not intervene to stop the extremists.

It was not immediately clear what group the gunmen belonged to but witnesses and local residents said they were loyalists of Ayman Askar, a local militia leader known for his links to both Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group.

Askar's militia is influential in Aden's district of Madinat Asha'ab where the faculties are located, according to residents.

Last month, radical gunmen also entered the faculty of administrative sciences in Aden and closed it down after threatening to use force against students if they did not observe segregation of the sexes.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), long active in Yemen, and the newly emerged IS appear to be vying for influence in the main port city.



Workers of Chandpur Tea Estate in Chunarughat upazila of Habiganj gather at a rally in the tea garden yesterday protesting the Special Economic Zone planned on hundreds of acres of arable land they have been using to grow rice. These workers depend on the rice to supplement their poor pay.

PHOTO: STAR

Credibility test for EC, govt

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violence. The EC also remained mostly aloof from taking any serious actions.

Therefore the EC's announcement that it would ensure foolproof security could not remove people's fear of violence during the polling hours and uncertainty over a free and fair election.

This election has a very strong distinguishing feature. For the first time, the mayoral polls are being held on partisan lines, allowing parties to step in the battle officially. Earlier, a political party could not nominate any candidate. It could only extend support to its leader to win the race. Elections to councillor posts however remain non-partisan like it was in past.

Officially 20 political parties joined the electoral race by fielding their candidates. But the battle royal will be between ruling AL and opposition BNP. After a break of seven years, the two archivals have formally stepped into the race with their electoral symbols-- boat and sheaf of paddy.

The last time they faced off was in December 2008 parliamentary election in which the AL won a landslide victory.

Their popularity and strength were not tested in the January 2014 parliamentary election as the BNP-led alliance stayed out of that battle.

In the outgoing year, the political situation has changed a lot. The year began with political turmoil. The BNP-led alliance enforced countrywide non-stop blockade from January 6 protesting the government's move to foil their programme to observe the first anniversary of the one-sided parliamentary election as a day of "democracy killing."

Widespread violence erupted around the country lasting for around

2010-2011 POLLS RESULTS	
Total Municipalities	237
AL	90
BNP	95
AL Rebels	21
BNP Rebels	9
Jamaat	5
JP	1
LDP	1
Independent	15

three months during the blockade coupled with frequent hartals. More than one hundred people were killed; most of them were innocent and burnt alive due to fire-bomb attack on public vehicles.

The law enforcement agencies took stern actions on the opposition alliance's leaders and activists. The movement failed to oust the government. The BNP was portrayed by their rival parties as a terrorist organisation. The party's many grassroots level leaders were on the run.

The situation in the AL camp is also not much better. Its organisational weakness was exposed during the political turmoil. The party had to depend on the law enforcement agencies to such an extent to face the opposition movement that chiefs of these agencies started to use political polemics in their statements.

Severe intra-party conflicts have

surfaced in this election as dissidents challenged party nominated mayoral candidates in many municipalities. Unruly activities of the ruling party men have also earned the party bad reputation.

In such a situation, wins and losses in today's battle of ballots, though in a small scale in terms of country's total voters (9.62 crore), will dictate to a great extent the issue of the credibility and popularity of the two archival parties.

In previous elections to local government bodies held since 2010, BNP backed candidates have done better than their opponents supported by AL.

In the last 237 municipality elections held in between December 2010 and January 2011, BNP men won 95 positions while AL leaders got 90.

In elections to five city corporations held in 2013, BNP backed mayoral candidates won all five mayoral posts defeating their rivals supported by AL. Chittagong City mayoral post in 2010 was also won by BNP backed candidate.

The previous records make the BNP high command hopeful for their candidates in today's voting.

The polls appear as a new challenge for anti-liberation force Jamaat-e-Islami, a key component of BNP-led alliance. It could not participate in the race as its registration as a parliamentary party was scrapped.

Yet, more than three dozen Jamaat grassroots level leaders are vying for mayoral posts. Many of them are fighting for councillor posts. Their success, the party leaders believe, will help Jamaat regain strength after the executions of its top leaders. Some other Jamaat leaders are facing trial on charges of war crimes in 1971.

Jatiya Party emerged as the main opposition in parliament thanks to BNP's boycott to the last parliamentary election. It was able to field only 74 mayoral candidates. Their performance will show the credibility and popularity of their party.

Candidates nominated by 16 other parties are not in discussion due to their parties' lack of support in the grassroots levels.

Seven mayoral candidates nominated by AL were elected uncontested before the polls. Therefore, votes will be cast to elect 227 mayors. Voters of the seven municipalities-- Pirojpur, Madarganj of Jamalpur, Tungipara, Feni, Porshuram, Chatkhil and Chhengar Char will cast votes to elect councillors.

The elected will run the municipalities for the next five years and deliver various civic services in their small towns.

The election generated much heat and triggered high hopes among local people for better services. But it will be difficult for the newly elected representatives to deliver on people's expectation as they lack the capacity.

Over the years, new municipalities were set up by successive governments to get political mileage. The number rose to 323 from 50 in 1974. But none of the previous governments had brought effective reforms to strengthen the municipality.

One thing that is notable is municipality elections have been held almost regularly since 1973.

And those who want to run municipalities need people's mandate through elections. This again and again upholds people's power as Abraham Lincoln has long ago said: "The ballot is stronger than the bullet."

GAZIPUR MILITANT DEN 2 cases filed

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

The Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) filed two cases over the death of two suspected Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) members in a raid by the elite force in Gazipur.

Both the cases were filed under the arms and explosive substances act with Joydebpur Police Station on Monday, said Khandaker Rezaul Hasan, officer-in-charge, of the police station.

According to the case statements, a Rab team raided an abandoned tinshed building adjacent to a mosque at Jotitola in Gazipur on Sunday evening. The team had information that some militants were planning subversive activities there.

Sensing presence of the Rab, the criminals started to hurl bombs at them, prompting the team members to retaliate with gunfire.

At one point, a bomb blast took place inside the building. The Rab team entered it around 2:30am Monday and saw two severely injured men on the floor.

The duo was rushed to local Shahid Tajuddin Ahmed Medical College Hospital where on-duty doctor declared them dead.

A loaded foreign pistol, remains of four bombs that went off, 29 detonators, two kgs of explosive materials and four Jihadi books were recovered from the spot, added the case statements.

Meanwhile, the identities of the duo could not be known till yesterday. No one claimed the bodies kept at the morgue of Gazipur hospital.

OC Rezaul of Joydebpur police said they will hand over the bodies to charity organisation Anjuman Mofidul Islam today, provided those remain unclaimed.

CEC talks

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duties neutrally as per the law. The Election Commission will not tolerate any irregularities and slackness in enforcing the law."

About media access to polling centres, Rakibuddin said journalists with accreditation cards from the EC and returning officers will be allowed in the centres to cover the elections without disturbing the voting process.

"We've directed top officials of law enforcement agencies not to obstruct journalists from entering polling stations," he noted.

He sought cooperation from all, especially from the political parties, candidates and the media, to hold the elections in a fair and peaceful manner.

He called upon the voters to go to the polling stations without any fear and cast votes for the candidates of their choice.

Apart from some stray incidents of violence, everybody conducted electioneering following the electoral code of conduct. Actions were taken against those who violated rules, claimed the CEC.

He told newsmen that the commission issued warnings to seven lawmakers and show-cause notices to many people for violating electoral law. Mobile courts fined 191 people over Tk 10 lakh and jailed four others for the same offence.

Law enforcers and Border Guard Bangladesh personnel have been deployed to maintain law and order. Executive and judicial magistrates were working to check any violation of electoral rules, said the EC chief.

'No' is tradition

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2010 and Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal, Sylhet and Gazipur City Corporation in 2013.

But in all those polls, the high profile AL-backed mayoral contenders faced humiliating defeat to their comparatively low profile local opponents supported by BNP.

Even in Narayanganj City Corporation polls in 2011, the AL-backed mayoral candidate was defeated by a huge margin by another local AL leader not blessed by her party.

Political analysts believe the outcomes of the five city corporations' elections in 2013 had sown the seeds of the 2014 one-sided parliamentary elections and buried the prospect of fair elections.

The AL-led government, that abolished the caretaker government by amending the constitution in 2011, has refused to allow any non-partisan administration to conduct the 2014 parliamentary polls to stay in power.

On the other hand, the victory in the mayoral polls boosted the morale of BNP and the party declined to negotiate with the AL to devise any formula for a make-shift government during the election.

The 2014 parliamentary polls were held amid a boycott by the BNP-led alliance when 153 MPs were elected unopposed. Electoral anomalies even in the one-sided polls damaged the integrity of the electoral system.

Then the upazila parishad elections held from February to March in the same year further tainted the electoral system. Ruling AL men resorted to widespread electoral anomalies by capturing polling stations and stuffing ballot boxes to ensure their win and the defeat of their BNP opponents.

The elections to three city corporations in Dhaka and Chittagong City Corporations held in April this year were also mired in controversy for widespread stuffing of ballot boxes by ruling party men. The AL backed mayoral

oral candidates won all the three mayoral posts in the controversial ballots.

SOME GOOD & BAD GENERAL ELECTIONS

Since restoration of democracy after the fall of the autocratic Ershad regime in 1990, the parliamentary polls of 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2008 have set examples of good elections.

The elections were credible as there was no lack of political commitment of the then non-partisan caretaker governments. The fair polls however did not favour the immediate past ruling party all the time. People rejected them and opted for the opposition parties.

Before independence, two free and fair elections were held-- East Pakistan Legislative Assembly polls in 1954 and general election in 1970.

In the 1954 elections, the ruling Muslim League, that led the movement to create Pakistan in 1947, faced a humiliating defeat to Jukto Front, an alliance of Awami League, Krishak Sramik Party, Nezam-e-Islam and Ganatantri Dal.

The 1970 general election, though held under military ruler General Yahya Khan, was largely free, fair and credible. The result however was not liked by the ruling coterie. Awami League won a landslide by winning 160 out of 162 parliamentary seats in the East Pakistan.

In Bangladesh, the first general election in 1973 was an exception. There was no strong opposition party to challenge Awami League-led by Bangabandhu, the undisputed leader and founding father of the new nation. In that polls AL got a landslide victory. Yet, some electoral anomalies put to question the credibility of the polls.

The parties in power--BNP and Jatiya Party-- won the parliamentary elections held in 1979, 1986 and 1988. Those elections were held either under military or autocratic regime

and did not enjoy credibility.

After restoration of democracy in 1990, BNP and AL were able to return to power through the two elections in February 1996 and January 2014. They were in power during the polls and the elections were not credible.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TODAY?

It has been evident that a free, fair election is an outcome of a government's political commitment to have credible polls in addition to a strong leadership by the Election Commission.

This commitment is translated into action through the government administration actively maintaining congenial atmosphere for an acceptable election.

The party in power also contributes to this endeavor by encouraging its leaders and activists to conduct their electioneering in line with the laws.

But both are alarmingly absent in the run up to the municipality polls. There are reports of some ruling party men engaging in actions that are damaging good atmosphere for free and fair polls in some electoral areas. Some ministers and MPs were accused of violating the electoral code of conduct. The administration could not take strong steps against the violence.

The EC has not shown a strong determination against violence and violation of electoral laws. Neither the government nor the ruling party has made any visible efforts urging ministers, MPs and AL men to abide by the electoral laws. The AL rather eyes a win in the polls by defeating the BNP to show its popularity.

The prevailing situation has triggering fear of widespread violence and uncertainty over a fair election today.

The electoral democracy now faces further challenge. By the end of today it will be clear whether it will overcome the challenge or come under brutal attack again as it faced in past.

Knock-on accident kills 4

Pickup tears through police barricade, runs over people collecting onions spilled from a flipped truck

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

In dense fog, a pickup tore through a police barricade set up to recover a flipped onion-laden truck and ran over four people who were collecting the onions on Bangabandhu Bridge approach road in Sirajganj.

Riaz Uddin, 45, Monirul Islam, 32, Jahidul Islam, 27, and Abdul Hamid, 35, were killed when they along with other poor people of Chokpara village rushed to the scene of an accident to collect onions early yesterday.

Five others were also injured.

The onion-laden truck had flipped over around 4:30am on the highway blocking it, and the poor villagers saw the opportunity to get free onions, said Abdul Kader Jilani, officer-in-charge of Hatikumrul Highway Police Station.

Police set up a barricade but the pickup apparently did not see it.

It ploughed into the people and killed Riazul and Monirul on the spot. The other two died of their injuries on their way to Sirajganj General Hospital.

Driver of the pickup ran away but the vehicle was seized from the spot, the OC said, adding that reckless driving

in dense fog was to blame.

Sources claimed that the police had asked the locals to pick up the onions from the highway so that the road could be opened.

Refuting the allegation, Officer-In-Charge Mostafizur Rahman of Salanga Police Station said, "... locals rushed to the spot immediately to collect free onions."

The incident created a huge traffic jam on the highway that connects Dhaka to northern districts.

Traffic flow was restored after an hour, sources said.

Textbooks on time

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inaugurate the celebration tomorrow by handing over books to students of different classes at Gono Bhaban in the capital at 10:00am.

On the New Year's Day, the education ministry would open the festival at Govt Laboratory School in Dhanmondi at 9:00am. The primary and mass education ministry would also hold a separate programme at National Bangla Govt School in Mirpur at 10:00am.

In the wake of persisting textbook crisis, the government in 2009 decided to distribute textbooks free of cost. It has been distributing free books to both primary and secondary level students at the very beginning of academic session since 2010.

This year, the government would distribute 33.37 crore copies of new textbooks of 291 subjects for pre-primary, primary, ebtadai [primary

level of madrasa], secondary, dakhil [secondary level of madrasa] and vocational students.

Education officials at the grassroots level had worked round the clock to send the books to destinations for several days, said officials at the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), the apex body looking after the government's book distribution scheme.

The education minister said printing work started late due to some complexities this year. "We have been printing primary textbooks before the secondary books. But this year we had to start the work late."

"Yet all books for primary level were printed and sent to the destinations," he observed.

On complaints of poor quality paper being used for primary textbooks, Nahid said they would examine the quality after distribution.

"We will take punitive actions if we find substandard paper was used."

Printing of primary textbooks hit a snag in mid-August when the World Bank set some conditions for the winning bidders, who submitted the bid much lower than the estimated cost.

The WB, which lends around 10 percent costs of primary textbooks, sought to check the quality during printing and wanted to pay the printers only if their work was satisfactory.

The bidders rejected outright the conditions but finally agreed to do the work in the first week of September upon assurance from the government high-ups that some of the conditions would be relaxed.

Nahid said there would be no problem if some books were damaged as they had five percent extra books in buffer stocks.