



The assistant presiding officer of booth-3 at Panthichila High School polling station of Ward-2 in Sitakunda municipality of Chittagong is left speechless and embarrassed after Awami League men went in and stamped ballot papers, right, in favour of the ruling party-backed mayor candidate and the pro-AL councillor aspirants there.

PHOTO: STAR

# Get lost...

## AL man tells journalist covering elections in Chittagong

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

It was around 11:00am. Voting at yesterday's municipality polls had just entered its fourth hour. People were standing in queues in front of all the 12 rooms at two polling centres in Sitakunda's Panthichila High School. However, none of them was being allowed in. Sensing something was wrong, this correspondent somehow managed to enter one of the rooms on the first floor of the two storey building. The floor was meant for male voters. There, he saw some people secretly stamping the "boat" symbol, allocated to the ruling party favorite, in front of the assistant presiding officer. Some others were busy putting the papers inside the ballot boxes. No agent of the BNP, Jamaat or even the rebel candidate of the Awami League could be seen. The polls official looked absolutely helpless. However, the ruling party men walked away the moment they noticed a journalist was around. This correspondent then went to the ground floor, which was for female

voters. The scene was the same there. As he took his mobile phone to take pictures and footage, some ruling party men came forward and requested him "to go away and return after 30 minutes to let them do their work." As the journalist refused to do so, one of them threatened him, saying, "Don't try to act smart... get lost." No member of the law enforcement agency was there. Talking to The Daily Star half an hour later, a male voter alleged that he had been provided with a ballot paper already stamped on the "boat" symbol. "As I protested, I was told to keep quiet and put the paper into the box," he said. According to the unofficial results, AL mayor candidate Bodiul Alam alone secured 2810 of the total 3,147 votes cast at the centres. Meanwhile, Golam Mortuza, photojournalist of daily Bonik Barta, alleged that some local jubo league men prevented him from entering a polling station at Duttabari Government primary School in the same upazila around noon yesterday.

# No surprise

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the enthusiasm they had witnessed among the business community several years ago. For instance, five years ago private sector credit stood at around 26 percent. Now, it has slumped to 13 percent. In fiscal 2010-11, private investment as a percentage of GDP stood at 22.14 percent. In fiscal 2014-15, it was 22.07. Ahmed said infrastructure has improved slightly but still it failed to spur private sector investment. New investment and expansion of existing business units have almost ground to a halt, and with it, job creation, Ahmed said. For instance, the interest rate in the call money market, which reflects the market demand for money, has gone down to as low as 1.25 percent, which is the lowest in a decade. Not only that, BB has stopped accepting the commercial banks' huge surplus money through the reverse repo two months back: it has run out of options to re-use the funds. "The main concern lies with the people engaged in business. They just do not see any demand," said Ashraf H Mansur, executive director of Policy Research Institute. The investment climate has not improved at all even after the dissolution of political turmoil, said Mansur, also a former official of the International Monetary Fund. The stock market, which is often considered the barometer for a country's economic health, is not going through a good phase either. The government and the central bank took ad-hoc measures in the outgoing year to resuscitate the ailing market but to no avail. There is no sign of recovery in the construction and the real estate sector that has been going through a trough since 2011. At present, there are 10,000 flats unsold, according to the Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh. External factors -- crisis in the US, Eurozone and China -- are also creat-

ing concerns for Bangladesh's exports. Remittance, which is one of the lifelines of the Bangladesh economy, suffered 0.68 percent negative growth in the first five months of the current fiscal year. Imports dropped 2.30 percent in the first four months of fiscal 2015-16, while exports increased 6.71 percent. Biru Paksha Paul, chief economist of BB, acknowledged that the economy has to move at much faster pace than what it is going now. Bangladesh can enjoy demographic dividends for the next 20 years and if the country does not move fast, people will miss out on the opportunity. "There must be an investment blitz in infrastructure, be it in tube rail, expressway or setting up connectivity." He, however, disagreed with the analysts on the private sector credit growth and GDP growth: the quality of credit has improved significantly now than few years ago. "There is nothing wrong if 13 percent private sector credit can generate a GDP growth of 6.5 percent," Paul said, while citing the case of India, which grew by over 8 percent with just 15 percent private sector credit. But to jump-start the economy in the new year, Mansur said the government can come up with an investment package of around \$25 billion, which may increase the budget deficit to 7 percent of GDP from present 5 percent for a period of time. Simultaneously, BB can raise \$8-\$10 billion by issuing sovereign bonds. In that case, the government will be able to spend an additional \$5 billion for development works each year, as a result of which all sectors -- be it cement, steel or services sectors -- will see significant rises in demand, he said. All the analysts however agreed that the situation will not materialise unless the government enhances its capacity to implement development works. Also, an improved investment climate, political stability, good governance and reforms are crucial for moving to a higher growth trajectory, they added.

# Irregularities aplenty

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The ruling party men intimidated BNP leaders and activists and prevented them from discharging duties as polling agents. In many centres, polling agents of BNP candidates were absent, report The Daily Star correspondents. Despite heavy presence of law enforcers in electoral areas, at least two dozen municipalities saw sporadic violence, which marred election festivity and dampened voters' enthusiasm. This time, however, violence was less intense than in the previous local body elections. A man was killed, as supporters of two councillor candidates traded gunshots in Satkania upazila of Chittagong. The dead was identified as Nurul Amin, a shopkeeper in Boaliapara area of the upazila. Followers of councillor aspirants Abdul Halim and Mozammel Haque clashed near Satkania Govt Primary School centre over taking control of the station around 11:00am, said Fariduddin Khan, officer-in-charge of Satkania Police Station. At one stage, both factions exchanged fire, and Amin was hit by bullets. He was rushed to Satkania

upazila health complex where he died from wounds, said the OC. During the polling hours, more than a hundred people, including four cops, were injured in clashes between AL and BNP supporters in different municipalities of Barguna, Moulvibazar, Chittagong, Narayanganj, Noakhali and Chandpur. In an incident of post-polls violence, unidentified criminals shot councillor-elect Rakib Uddin of Ward-9 in Daudkandi municipality of Comilla, leaving him seriously injured. Rakib came under attack at Daudkandi High School playground around 9:00pm, said police. He was whisked off to a local clinic from where he was brought to Dhaka Medical College Hospital around 11:30pm, said Sentu Das, a sub-inspector at the DMCH police camp. Earlier, voting in the 234 municipalities began peacefully at 8:00am. As the day progressed, allegations of vote rigging in different centres began surfacing. In many municipalities, voters found that their ballots had already been cast. Some others complained

that they were barred allegedly by ruling party men from entering polling centres. AL men snatched ballot papers and stuffed ballot boxes in a number of municipalities. In some cases, election officials either helped them stuff ballot boxes or played the role of silent spectators, The Daily Star correspondents found. Meanwhile, several AL activists were jailed for resorting to electoral irregularities during the polling. A mobile court sentenced Mohammad Selim, 35, member of Matiranga municipality AL unit, to a year's imprisonment for trying to snatch ballots at Matiranga Pilot High School centre in Khagrachhari. AL leader and councillor aspirant Mohammad Harun of Ward-6 in Rangunia municipality was jailed for two years for trying to take away ballot boxes from Majumder Khil High School centre in Chittagong. In a number of municipalities, AL men drove BNP candidates' agents out of polling centres. In Jamalpur Sadar municipality, AL men and supporters of the party's mayoral aspirant Mirza Shakhawatul

Alam Moni ousted polling agents from all 42 polling centres within two hours of voting. Agents of BNP candidates were not seen during polling hours in many centres of 15 municipalities in Barisal. While carrying out electoral irregularities, workers and followers of AL candidates clashed with supporters of BNP contestants in many municipalities of Comilla, Chandpur, Laxmipur, Barisal, Barguna, Chittagong, Pirojpur and Munshiganj. They even clashed with supporters of rebel candidates in some municipalities, including those in Habiganj and Barguna. The BNP and its mayoral candidates complained of "widespread vote rigging" throughout the day. But the ruling AL claimed that voting, by and large, was free and fair except for "a few irregularities". "This municipality election was held in a freer, fairer and more festive manner than any other local government polls in the past," AL Joint General Secretary Mahbul Alam Hanif said at a press briefing at the party president's Dhanmondi office yesterday afternoon.

# Journos become target again

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Ruling party men beat up Farhana Rahman, senior reporter of Ekattor TV, her cameraperson, and their driver yesterday morning at Habiganj Zila Parishad polling centre. "We rushed to this polling centre hearing about ballot box stuffing. But an Awami League activist wearing the badge of the party asked me not to enter the polling station. As we tried to enter, he and some other activists started beating me up pulling me by my hair," said Farhana in a live interview with a satellite channel immediately after the incident. In Sunamganj, ruling party men attacked four journalists at Sunamganj Government Women College polling station in presence of AL mayor candidate Ayub Bakhat Jaglul. During the attack, they also broke two cameras of Channel 24 and Channel 9. Latifur Rahman Raju, Sunamganj correspondent of Bangla daily Sangbad, and Maidul Raseel, Sunamganj correspondent of Channel 24, were injured in the incident. Journalists present during the incident observed a symbolic five-minute sit in at the polling station protesting the attack. Four more journalists had minor injuries during an attack when they were shooting the snatching of a ballot box in Moulvibazar Mazar Government Primary School polling station. Unknown criminals beat up SAIV correspondent Panna Dutta, Somoy TV correspondent Waliur

Rahman, Kalerkantho reporter Abdul Hamid Mahub, and Banglanews correspondent Mahbubur Rahman Rahel. Their cameras and other valuables were taken away. The AL and the BNP blamed each other for the incident. In Sirajganj, supporters of Sultan Talukder, a ruling party leader and councillor aspirant of Sirajganj municipality, attacked Naushad Ahmed, president of Sirajganj district photographer association, as he tried to take a photo of ballot box stuffing at Rahmatganj Girls School polling station. They broke his camera and took his two mobile phones. In Thakurgaon, Masranga television correspondent Badrul Islam Biplab, also the secretary of district press club, and Jamuna TV reporter Partha Sarathy Das were attack when they went to see the ballot box stuffing at the Polytechnic Centre in the town. In Munshiganj, ruling party men vandalised the camera of RTV. A journalist was also assaulted in Singra of Natore. Apart from assaults, journalists were threatened and obstructed yesterday. Rajshahi police detained bureau chief of Bangla daily Samakal and Rajshahi correspondent of ATN news Saurav Habib, his cameraperson Rabiul Islam Khokon, and assistant Tariquzzaman Tuesday night. Border Guard Bangladesh claimed

that it took the three in as they had entered a BGB area without permission and later handed them over to police. Police released them around 7:30pm yesterday. However, sources claimed that Saurav was detained so that he could not monitor the polls in which his maternal uncle GA Mahira Bachhu was an AL rebel candidate. The Daily Star correspondents were also prevented from entering polling centres and doing their job. When The Daily Star reporter Mokammel Haque went to the Institute Government Primary School polling station at 7:50am, AL activists prevented him from entering. They drove Mokammel away around 8:10am. He managed to get in later and saw ballot box stuffing going on but was forced to leave again at 9:15am. A number of AL activists accused Mokammel of carrying a fake ID card, which was actually issued by the Election Commission, and even policemen on duty there joined in with the AL activists. "I had covered many elections in my life but never faced such a scary situation," said Mokammel. When The Daily Star photojournalist Rashed Shumon was taking photos at Jessore Police Lines polling centre in the morning, he was asked to leave. He informed the returning officer and police officers of the matter but they did not do anything. Our Chittagong correspondent

Minhaj Uddin also faced obstacles while covering the polls. Yesterday, journalists were not allowed inside the building where the three election commissioners have offices in Agargaon of Dhaka. When asked, the EC secretary told a Bangla daily that they have stopped journalists from going in so that officials do not have any trouble in working. However, delegations of AL and the BNP were allowed in. Meanwhile, Article 19, an international human rights organisation working for the protection of freedom of expression, in a press release issued last night said there were at least 26 cases of journalist assault during yesterday's polls. It observed that members of the electronic media, especially those in charge of taking photos and shooting video, were targeted. It said in 11 incidents equipment of journalists were damaged. Article 19 covered 266 polling centres of 67 municipalities in 63 districts. It said there were at least 47 cases in which journalists were prevented, by force, from entering polling centres. During polls to Dhaka city corporations earlier, several journalists, including a reporter of this paper, were assaulted by ruling party men.

## Russian court jails blogger

REUTERS, Moscow

A Russian court yesterday sentenced a blogger to five years in jail for what it said was his extremist activity on the Internet after he urged people to attend a protest against high transport fares and criticized Russian intervention in Ukraine. Vadim Tyumenstev, 35, from the Siberian region of Tomsk, was also banned from using the Internet for three years in a case which Russian human rights activists said violated his rights to a proper defense. Tyumenstev irked local authorities in Tomsk with a series of blogs in which he accused them of corruption and incompetence. He had also sharply criticized pro-Kremlin separatists in eastern Ukraine, saying he did not see why ordinary Russians should go and fight with them.

# 49 candidates quit mayoral race

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"cooperate" with him and favoured the AL rebel candidate. Moharaj and seven others were bullet-hit in a clash between some AL men and law enforcers. In Chittagong, BNP mayor aspirants Azmat Ullah Bahadur in Sandwip municipality, Abdullah Al Hasan in Raozan and Mohammad Helal Uddin Khan in Rangunia boycotted the polls. They alleged that the ruling party men took control of many polling centres and ousted their polling agents from there. BNP mayor hopeful in Mirsarai

municipality Mainuddin Liton demanded re-election. The party's mayor nominees in Raipur of Lakshmipur, Akhaura in Brahmanbaria, Madhupur and Gopalpur in Tangail, Borhanuddin and Doulat Khan in Bhola, Madhabdi, Monohardi and Narsingdi Sadar in Narsingdi, Iswardi in Pabna, Kalai in Joypurhat, Bhairab and Bajitpur in Kishoreganj, Kalia in Narail, Harinakunda in Jhenidah, Pangsha in Rajbari, Kalapara in Patuakhali, Swarupkathi in Pirojpur, Magura Sadar, Abhoyanagar, Monirampur, Bagharpara, Chougachha, Keshabpur

and Jessore sadar in Jessore either quit the polls race or demanded re-polling. Besides, BNP rebel Anisur Rahman Talukder of Kalai in Joypurhat boycotted the election. AL rebel mayor hopefuls in Dewanganj of Jamalpur, Shahjadpur of Sirajganj, Dhamrai of Dhaka, Narsingdi Sadar, Kalai of Narail, Munshiganj Sadar, Kumarkhali of Kushtia and Bajitpur of Kishoreganj withdrew from the polls race. Jatiya Party candidates in Jamalpur Sadar, Gobindaganj of Gaibandha and Kuakata of Patuakhali stayed away from the polls.