

'Irregularities mar peaceful polls'

Says chief election commissioner

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The overall achievement of the Election Commission in holding yesterday's union parishad polls peacefully has been marred by irregularities in some places, Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad said.

Briefing reporters at the EC secretariat in the evening, he warned of taking actions against those involved in electoral irregularities.

The ruling Awami League, however, claimed the second phase of the UP election was free, fair and peaceful like the first one.

The BNP demanded cancellation of elections of both the phases as those saw "widespread irregularities and violence".

A total of 639 unions in 47 districts went to polls yesterday. At least six people were killed and 130 injured in electoral violence on the day.

A three-member BNP delegation, led by its Joint Secretary General Mohammad Shahjahan, met the CEC at the latter's office around 4:30pm.

Talking to reporters after the meeting, Shahjahan said: "We've urged the

CEC to cancel the union parishad polls and improve the electoral environment. If the Election Commission fails to do so, we would consider not contesting polls under this commission in future."

AL BRIEFING

AL Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif at a press conference at the party president's Dhanmondi office said the polls cannot be termed faulty as irregularities took place in only 22 polling stations out of over 6,000.

Referring to killing of "three" people in polls violence, he said one of them died of "heart attack" in Jamalpur yesterday.

"But killing of two people is unacceptable. We gave directives to the law enforcement agencies to take tough actions against the culprits involved in those incidents," Hanif added.

In the first phase, elections to 712 unions were held on March 22. Elections to 621 unions are slated for April 23 in the third phase. A total of 743 unions will go to polls on May 7 in fourth phase and around 1,400 more unions in two other phases till June.



Vehicles coming from over and under a section of the Moghbar-Mouchak Flyover get stuck near a traffic signal in front of the Holy Family Hospital yesterday. The Saat Rasta-Holy Family Hospital stretch was inaugurated on Wednesday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Bloodshed stalks polls

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and soon after voting hours.

Another two people were killed and three others injured in a blast while making bombs in Jessore, hours before the voting began. The explosion took place just beside a polling centre in Libutola union in Sadar upazila around 7:30pm on Wednesday, police said.

Voting to 639 union parishads in 47 districts began at 8:00am and continued till 4:00pm without any break.

Official figure of voter turnout was not available, but our district correspondents said voters' presence appeared "satisfactory". Women voters in particular turned out in large numbers braving rain in some areas and overcoming fear of violence.

Dampening their enthusiasm, however, violence and irregularities took place in more than 70 unions. Supporters of chairmen and member candidates used firearms, leaving at least 20 people bullet-hit.

At least 19 candidates from BNP, one AL rebel and one independent candidate boycotted polls citing irregularities. In some unions, the ruling AL men intimidated BNP leaders and activists to keep them from working as polling agents. Polling agents of BNP chairman candidates were found absent from many stations, as witnessed by The Daily Star correspondents.

Voting in 35 polling stations was suspended due to violence and irregularities, according to Election Commission officials.

A presiding officer and two assistant presiding officers were arrested for helping fake voters cast

ballots in Jessore.

In the first-phase of the election held on March 22, at least 10 people lost their lives and more than 1,000 were injured.

Besides, 11 more were killed in polls-related violence since the announcement of the polls schedule on February 11.

The AL chairman candidates swept the first-phase polls, winning in 540 out of the 725 UPs. BNP candidates won in 47 unions, Jatiya Party in four while independent candidates and other parties sealed victory in the remaining unions.

Elections to 621 UPs are slated for April 23 in the third phase, 743 UPs on May 7 in the fourth phase and around 1,400 more UPs in two other phases till June.

In Chittagong, two people were killed and a police constable was injured in a gunfight between supporters of two rival chairmen aspirants and police at Char Bauria Government Primary School centre of Char Baurai union of Sandwip upazila around 4:15pm.

The dead are Md Sanullah, 45, son of Mozzaffor Ahmed of Sukani, and Md Ibrahim, 30, son of Md Kurishasa of Majihar Bari, said Additional Superintendent (special branch) Abdul Awal of Chittagong police.

Both the victims died instantly. Another person named Md Jamal was also bullet-hit, but his condition was not clear, police said.

Constable Md Alamin from Rangamati Police Station suffered bullet wounds during the incident.

Abdul Awal, the ASP, said brandishing lethal weapons and carrying sticks,

supporters of independent candidate Md Zillur Rahman entered the polling centre and tried to snatch ballot boxes by opening fire.

"Police tried to obstruct them. But supporters of rival Awami League candidate Md Jamal Uddin attacked them with lethal weapons and opened fire to establish supremacy at the polling centre," said the ASP.

Police was compelled to open fire in self-defence, said Abdus Salam, officer-in-charge of Sandwip Police Station.

In Keraniganj, Shuvo Kazi Srabon, a fourth-grader at Madhurchar Government Primary School in Hazratpur union, was killed in firing allegedly by a supporter of the AL chairman candidate.

"A group of Awami League activists led by local leader Rana Molla entered the voting centre and opened fire. My son was shot in the chest," said Halim, the boy's father.

At least seven voters were hit by bullet in the shooting.

In Madaripur, a DU student was killed during violence between supporters of two member candidates around 5:30am at Dakkhin Birongol Nurani Madrasa Centre under Dhurail union, said Sarwar Hossain, superintendent of the district police.

The dead is Sujan Mridha, son of Bachchu Mirdha of Dakkhin Birongol village. He was a third-year student of marketing, confirmed DU proctor Prof MA Ali.

Witnesses and family members said Sujan was killed in police shooting, but the SP said neither the police nor the BGB opened fire there.

According to him, the youth was

killed in a clash between two groups.

In Jessore, a hawker was killed in clashes between supporters of two rival member candidates in Chanchra union under Sadar upazila.

The dead is Abdus Sattar, 65, said Ilias Hossain, officer-in-charge (OC) of Jessore Kotwali Police Station.

Sattar was caught in the line of fire between two rival member candidates around 12:30pm at Bhaturia Government Primary School polling centre, where at least 10 bombs were exploded, the OC said.

The two men who were killed while "making bombs" are Ibadul Islam, 38, of Andolpota, and Md Sabuj, 29, of Talikhola area. Both died at Jessore Medical College Hospital while being treated, said the OC of Jessore Kotwali Police Station.

Meanwhile, Hasan, 30, organising secretary of Noapara ward AL, suffered bullet injuries in another clash between AL and BNP supporters at a centre in Arpara under Noapara Union in Jessore around 10:30am.

In Jamalpur, a voter was allegedly beaten to death during a clash between supporters of two member candidates at Uttar Balurchar Government Primary School polling centre in Shyampur union in Melandah upazila.

The dead is Rafiqul Islam, 50, of Uttar Balurchar village in the union.

Locals said supporters of member candidate Muksed Ali were locked in a clash with supporters of member aspirant Marjina Begum over casting fake votes at the centre around 11:00am. Caught in the clash, Rafiqul was beaten to death.

However, Nasimul Islam, OC of

Melandah Police Station, claimed the man died of heart attack.

At least 20 people were injured in sporadic clashes at different polling centres of 25 unions under the two upazilas.

In Manikganj, a woman was killed when a member-elect of Baghutia union of Daulatpur upazila attacked the house of the defeated member candidate around 8:30pm.

Nomesa Begum, 55, was a supporter and neighbour of defeated candidate Shipon Ali, said Harun-Ar-Rashid, an ASP of Manikganj.

Four others were injured in the attack.

Besides, an AL man was wounded as law enforcers opened fire when the man, accompanied by his cohorts, was trying to snatch ballot boxes at a polling centre in Boyra union under Harirampur upazila, said Jakir Hasan, additional SP of Manikganj.

In Natore, a youth named Biplob, 30, was killed and nine others were injured in violence at Baknai Dakhil Madrasa Centre in Lalpur upazila, said police.

At least nine others were injured, said Abdul Hai Talukdar, OC of Lalpur Police Station.

In Sherpur, at least 25 people, including a presiding officer, were injured in clashes at several polling stations in several unions.

In Munshiganj, around 20 people were injured in clashes in 18 unions in two upazilas.

In Dinajpur, at least 10 people were hit by bullets as law enforcers opened fire to foil an attempt of snatching ballot boxes in Binail union under Birampur upazila around 9:30pm.

In Mymensingh, at least two people sustained bullet injuries when police resorted to shooting to stop a clash between supporters of AL-nominated and AL's rebel candidates at Maizpara Polling Centre in Kamaria Union in Tarakanda upazila during vote counting around 6:30pm.

In Bhola, district correspondent of ntv Afzal Hossain suffered bullet injuries. Police claimed the bullet was fired "mistakenly" by a cop at a polling centre of Razapur union in Sadar upazila.

In Cox's Bazar, law enforcers beat up Sujauddin Rubel, a correspondent of Shomoy TV.

In Tangail, 18 people, including a rebel AL candidate, were arrested while casting fake votes at different polling centres in Bhuapur upazila.

In Thakurgaon, several unruly men snatched ballot papers and vandalised ballot boxes in two polling centres in Haripur upazila.

In Natore, agents of BNP candidates were not present in many of the polling stations of 11 unions in two upazilas. AL men were seen seeking votes in many centres in presence of law enforcers, flouting electoral code.

In Kushtia, the ruling party men intimidated BNP men in several polling stations of 11 unions so that no one can cast vote for the BNP candidate, said locals and BNP leaders.

Stray violence and irregularities also took place in Comilla, Chandpur, Brahmanbaria, Gazipur, Jhenidah, Sirajganj, Noakhali, Sunamganj, Magura and Lalmonirhat.



A police cordon on the spot in Comilla Cantonment area where the body of Sohagi Jahan Tonu was found on March 20.

PHOTO: FILE

HR boss sees all the bad signs

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bush."

He feared that if the evidence had got distorted, the investigation might get difficult.

Earlier, the NHRC chief talked to the parents of Tonu and exchanged views with Comilla deputy commissioner, superintendent of police and army officials.

Contacted by The Daily Star, Col Ziaul Ahsan, additional director general (operations) of Rapid Action Battalion, confirmed that the elite force dug up the spot for collecting soil.

"There is nothing wrong in collecting evidence from a place where a crime has taken place and police did not cordon off the area yet," said Ziaul Ahsan.

The Rab, however, was never officially assigned to probe the murder. The case has been transferred to the CID from the Detective Branch of Comilla police.

The NHRC boss also talked about a reported search of the cantonment house of Tonu when her family members were away for the burial.

The army collected some everyday items, including a diary of Tonu, during the search, according to the family members. Police say the diary was later handed over to them as evidence.

Mizanur Rahman also observed that police are not being allowed to collect evidence as the crime scene is in the cantonment area. Instead, the army first collect evidence and then hand it over to police by making a list.

"Should we regard this step made from the position of being ultra-cautious?" he asked.

"Sometimes ultra-cautiousness may be interpreted as weakness," said Mizanur. He urged the agencies, which are not officially assigned to probe the murder, to refrain from taking such

steps.

The NHRC boss also said it was necessary to bring to book those responsible for the inadequacy in the first post-mortem, which was done the day after Tonu was found murdered on March 20.

The body of Tonu, a student of Comilla Victoria College, was exhumed on Wednesday for a fresh autopsy as police say they found that the first one didn't match with their inquest report.

However, the findings of the first autopsy were not made public.

In another recommendation, the commission chief said the family of the victim should not be harassed in the name of collecting information or by any means.

On March 25, Rab-11 members brought Anwara from Mirzapur village in Muradnagar upazila to the city, saying she was needed for identifying some suspects who were in their custody, family members said.

Instead of showing any suspect, the Rab took Anwara to her cantonment house.

The NHRC chairman Mizan pledged to learn from the home ministry about Rab's role in this regard.

Still, he said, Tonu's family has confidence in the prime minister and he requested the media to help the family's appeal for justice reach the PM.

BBC Bangla yesterday in a report quoted Tonu's father Yaar Hossain as saying, "My daughter died inside the cantonment ... if I cannot say this, just shoot me down."

Yaar Hossain, an employee of Comilla Cantonment Board, was being interviewed by BBC Bangla for the programme, Probaho.

Cultural personality Nasiruddin Yusuff Bachchu said, "You have exhumed the body after burying it

once. You have done many things in haste without completing the tasks properly. Why? These questions will surely be raised in public mind."

It was Tonu's 19th birth day yesterday.

PROTEST CONTINUES

Bangladesh Chhatra Union (BCU) yesterday called a strike at all schools and colleges in the country for April 4 demanding justice for Tonu.

The call came after police stopped a march to the Prime Minister's Office by the left-leaning student body at Shahbagh intersection around noon.

As per the earlier announcement, Chhatra Union started the march from Raju Memorial Monument in TSC area on expiry of its 48-hour deadline for the arrest of Tonu's killer(s).

Scuffles broke out with police in front of Dhaka University's Fine Arts Institute when around a hundred agitators crossed police barricades.

GM Zilani Shuvo, general secretary of BCU, claimed that two activists were injured in the scuffles.

Facing police obstruction, the students held an impromptu rally there.

Until now, general students of Dhaka University along with the students of more than five educational institutions of the capital have called for a strike at all educational institutions on April 3 in protest.

Protest was also staged near Jatiya Press Club yesterday morning by 70-80 school-going children covering eyes with black cloths.

Several departments of Dhaka University formed human chain on the campus. Hundreds of teachers and students joined the demonstration.

Bangladesh in right direction

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condition will improve in the coming year, and 65 percent believe the country is becoming more stable politically.

"Still, Bangladeshis list the economy and security as their country's biggest problems," says the survey carried out by Nielsen-Bangladesh between February 4 and 21.

"Anxiety about security in particular has increased eight percentage points since November 2015 and, at 21 percent, is now tied with the economy as the most important problem facing Bangladesh."

The percentage of respondents, who listed corruption among the country's

most serious problems, dropped from 18 to nine percent since November 2015.

The top example of corruption in Bangladesh -- cited by 45 percent of the respondents -- was paying bribes to secure jobs, mentions the survey.

It says 53 percent of the respondents cited political extremism as a very big problem, while 44 percent mentioned religious extremism.

Asked generally about the main cause of extremism, "political difference" was the most common response with 38 percent of the respondents vouching for it, according to the survey.

Religious extremism was mentioned by only six percent of the respondents as the reason while 47 percent didn't give any response.

"It reveals only one percent of the respondents said the use of violence was justified while 93 percent said violence is never justified," it adds.

The sample was stratified by the eight administrative divisions, by district and by urban and rural locations. The sample consisted of 2,550 respondents (response rate: 43 percent) aged 18 and above, and was representative of voting-age adults nationally.