

Joya wins Sunamganj-2 by-election

UNB, Sunamganj

Awami League candidate Joya Sengupta, wife of late lawmaker Suranjit Sengupta, was declared unofficially elected in the by-election to Sunamganj-2 constituency yesterday.

Joya bagged 95,995 votes while her nearest rival Mahub Hossain Reju, an independent contestant, polled 40,172 votes.

The parliamentary seat fell vacant following the death of Suranjit who died at a hospital in the capital after a prolonged illness.

NEW TRANSPORT LAW Tangail bus staff go on wildcat strike

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Without warning, transport workers in Tangail went for a strike yesterday morning, demanding cancellation of the draft Road Transport Act-2017 approved by the cabinet on Monday.

Buses services to Dhaka, Mymensingh, Jamalpur and northern districts from Tangail were suspended. Local bus services were also put on hold, causing untold sufferings to passengers.

According to Tangail Bus-Coach Owners Association, about 700 to 800 vehicles were supposed run on different routes from Tangail.

Passenger Abdul Mazid said he had urgent work in Dhaka but was unable to find any direct buses to the capital.

"Now I am going to the Dhaka-Tangail highway to try to get on a bus heading for Dhaka from northern districts," he said.

Trader Mohammad Al Amin of Delduar said he and his family were supposed to travel to Dhaka but was unable to get any transport.

"The transport workers cannot enforce a strike without notice. They should consider the sufferings of the people," he said.

Mir Lutfar Rahman Laiju, general secretary of Tangail District Bus-Coach Workers Union, said transport workers were handing over the keys of buses to their owners.

"The drivers and helpers told us that they will not drive buses with potential life-term imprisonment or death penalty. Besides, they also do not accept that all drivers need to complete class-VIII in order to qualify for driving licences."

"We are trying to manage the angry workers. The workers federation will take steps to discuss the matter with the government," he added.

The transport workers' leader urged the prime minister to reconsider the draft law and only finalise it after bringing changes to several of its sections. He also urged that the amendments should be done to the draft law so that it was similar to that of neighbouring countries.

Hard to get

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from the river but from the lone pond at Ismail Howlader's house. During the dry months pond water becomes scarce and particularly discoloured.

"We use this water for all household work," says Idris Matbor, a local tea stall proprietor. "Bathing, washing and drinking: all is done with pond water. We have urged our council members and the union chairman to install a tube well, but in vain."

"This is a remote area," says the local chairman Md Anamul Haq Mollah. "People in our community are deprived of many rights including access to pure drinking water. We face a shortage of tube wells."

Yet the shoals of Chandradip are not alone. Shoal-dwellers in other unions within Bauphal upazila, and in neighbouring Rangabali and Galachipa upazilas as well, face the same drinking-water problem.

"We are planning to address the water crisis across the shoals," says the local executive engineer for the public health and engineering department, Mohammad Mahmud Khan. "We hope the plan can be implemented as a matter of priority."

In the meantime life on the frontier shoals continues to harbour struggle. Water is not the only issue. Health and education facilities could also be improved.

It may be that Bangladeshis are rightly described as indefatigable. It may be that those who live on the shoals between mainland and sea are among the most resilient of all. Still it is to be hoped that the hardship of daily lives in such remote communities may soon find a little respite, the respite that access to safe drinking water can bring.



Joya Sengupta, wife of late ruling party lawmaker Suranjit Sengupta, middle, after she was unofficially declared elected in the by-election to Sunamganj-2 constituency yesterday. PHOTO: COLLECTED

A kind-hearted

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would commit suicide. I still can't believe it."

An autopsy might confirm if it was a suicide.

But her mother Aminath Muharrimath, who flew in to Rajshahi along with the Maldives ambassador yesterday afternoon, requested police to hand over the body to the family without a post mortem, said Amir Zafar, deputy commissioner of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police.

Rajshahi police sought permission from the police headquarters in Dhaka in this regard.

"If all important family members including her parents want her body without autopsy, we can think about it," Zafar said.

Police, however, have doubts as to whether the "inspiring" girl who had once been featured as a model on the cover of Vouge India magazine could commit suicide, added the city's chief police official of east zone.

A primary probe and the inquest report suggest it is a case of suicide.

Maldives Ambassador to Bangladesh Aishath Shann Shakir and the victim's mother, meanwhile, visited the private medical college where Athif had been studying in the second year for her MBBS degree. They also talked to her friends, college authorities and police.

Most of Athif's friends refused to talk to the media.

The last time she was seen studying with Indian Kashmiri girl Sirat Parveen at the dorm around 12:30am that day. Police believe she died sometime after that.

Sirat declined to talk.

Najaa Faiz, who stays in a room next to Athif's, said her death was shocking and unbelievable.

The two became friends since Athif went to the college in January last year.

"I remember her as a happy person. She was an inspiration to so many people," said Najaa shedding tears.

Najaa along with Athif and another friend made two swings under the shade of a mango tree inside their hostel premises in March.

Athif used to tell them, "After I go back home, these [swings] will remain as a memory of us over here."

"Girls will go to the shed, relax and

think of us," she had said as quoted by Najaa.

"Every time I see the swings now, I can't hold my tears," Najaa said.

The college authorities mourned Raudha's death at a meeting yesterday morning. They termed the incident as "suicide" committed out of "a wrong decision made from personal depression".

5-fold hike

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at least Tk 500 every six months.

Muhtith also said he planned to stop production of bidi [a type of cheap cigarette] in two years as it was "very dangerous to public health".

"I want this [banned]," But bidi has strong lobbyists, he said. "More than half the MPs support it. They write letters to me. I don't know why they do this."

The argument that many workers are employed in the bidi factories is baseless, he claimed, terming the industry "dead and fraudulent".

He also suggested that the sector provided only Tk 20 crore in taxes each year.

Zafullah recommended reducing taxes on medical equipment to cut healthcare costs. Between 20 and 60 percent duties are imposed on the imports of medical equipment, he pointed out.

He also recommended making it compulsory for intern doctors to work in rural areas for at least a year.

Muhtith said he supports Zafullah's proposal but it was not possible for him alone to implement it. He said the health ministry would have to make a decision in this regard.

Rasheda K Chowdhury, former adviser to a caretaker government, recommended allocating 18 percent of the budget to education sector and then gradually raising it to 20 percent.

Executive Director of Manusher Jonno Foundation Shaheen Anam stressed the need for forming a directorate for development of children.

She also recommended increased allocation for marginalised communities and setting up a monitoring mechanism to ensure the allotted funds were spent for the target group.

DNA sample

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could not identify her. Police collected the DNA samples of her father Nurul Islam and brother Jiabul Haque, who were taken there from Bandarban.

Monjeara used the name Marjina Begum while staying at Atia Mahal, the house in Sylhet city's Shibbari area where the army had launched "Operation Twilight".

Suicide-vest-strapped bodies of two militants are still in the building.

Basudeb Banik, deputy commissioner of SMP, told The Daily Star that the Bomb Disposal Unit of police was yet to sweep the entire building as lots of explosives were still there.

He said the Police Bureau of Investigation and the Criminal Investigation Department of police would collect evidence and samples from the building once the bomb disposal unit finished its clean up.

Police cordoned off the building and the neighbourhood and restricted movement of people there. Gas connection in the area was restored on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, law enforcers with the help of the army yesterday destroyed what appeared to be a bomb, hours after the object was discovered in Shahi Eidgah area of the city.

Police had sealed off the scene with yellow tape at 9:30am and a bomb disposal unit of the army from Jalalabad Cantonment was called in, said Mossharraf Hossain, officer-in-charge of Sylhet Airport Police Station.

Anamul Haque, proprietor of Anam Enterprise, told The Daily Star that he spotted the "black object" in front of his shop when he opened his store in the morning.

Faisal Mahmud, deputy commissioner (north) of SMP, said no case would be filed as this was in no way a real bomb. He said someone must have left it there to scare people.

However, a general diary would be lodged with Sylhet Airport Police Station, he said.

French artist

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Abraham Poincheval aims to become a "human hen" by sitting and laying on the eggs inside a glass vitrine at a Paris modern art museum until the chicks emerge.

The performance, called "Egg", could last three to four weeks, with the artist getting only a half-hour break every 24 hours to keep him from cracking.

He is also on a special diet rich in ginger so he can keep the eggs at a minimum of 37 degrees Celsius (98.6 degrees Fahrenheit).

Poincheval, 44, made headlines earlier this month after declaring his seven days inside a rock a mind-altering "trip".

This time, however, he looked distinctly ill at ease as he stepped into the vitrine in the Palais de Tokyo museum in his socks.

He quickly wrapped himself in a heavy traditional Korean cape and sat on a "laying table" specially designed to stop him from accidentally crushing the eggs.

While Poincheval described his time inside the limestone rock as blissful, he acknowledged that sitting on the eggs for such a long time had him worried.

"I have never been so directly exposed to the public before. Usually I am inside something. But every performance is a first," he told AFP.

His father Christian acknowledged that it was a test of his mental strength, with the usually amiable Poincheval avoiding eye contact with the crowds gathered around the glass case.

"He is going into himself," his father said, describing the experience of observing his son through the vitrine as "like watching him on TV".

He revealed that when Poincheval was a child he had a pet chicken, and promised that any "hen-men and hen-women" his son brings into the world will be allowed to live out their natural lives on his smallholding in the west of France.

BNP's Monirul wins

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phone around 10:30pm yesterday. Anjum said people cast ballots for the candidate they considered competent. "I accept the people's verdict."

Earlier in the day, ruling AL men allegedly captured at least a dozen polling stations and stuffed ballot boxes to ensure win for their mayoral candidate.

The polling, however, was largely peaceful.

Visiting 15 of the 103 polling stations, The Daily Star correspondents saw the AL candidate's supporters stuff ballot boxes and stage show-down inside and at the entrance to some of the centres.

In five of the polling stations, the ruling party men closed the entrance and stuffed ballot boxes. But the police personnel there took no action.

The night before the election day, members of the police, Rab, BGB and Ansar were seen patrolling the city areas frequently.

But within a couple of hours since the voting began at 8:00am, the apparent calm and quiet atmosphere turned chaotic in some polling centres as ruling party men moved to capture those.

For example, a large number of male and female voters were seen standing in queues at Comilla Government City College centre to cast ballots even before the polling started.

But the atmosphere changed following the blasts of two cocktails -- one inside and the other outside the centre -- around 10:30am. Voters who were standing in queues ran for cover.

Within minutes, several groups of youths wearing badges with "boat" symbol entered the polling booths at the centre.

This correspondent saw many of them snatch ballot papers from polling officials and stuff ballots boxes with those.

Asked why the law enforcers were not taking any action, police inspector Md Shahid, who was on duty in front of a polling booth there, advised this correspondent to talk to the presiding officer.

But by that time, the presiding officer along with other election officials had taken shelter in a room and locked its door.

Youths wearing badges with "boat" symbol beat up Md Farhad, an agent of a BNP-backed councillor candidate, as he protested ballot-stuffing.

One of the youths identified himself as Ripon and also a Jubo League member. He requested this correspondent several times not to "disturb" him.

Since voting began at the centre, Ripon and his 15 to 20 aides were seen loitering around the polling booths at the centre. They talked to inspector Shahid several times before and after the capture of the polling station by the youths.

When several mobile courts and strike forces comprising Rab and BGB personnel reached there around 11:30am, the youths came out of the

polling booths, but didn't leave the centre.

Around 12:00noon, the EC suspended voting at the polling centre.

The situation at Gobindapur Government Primary School centre, close to AL candidate Anjum's house, was worse than that at the City College centre.

Ballot-stuffing by ruling party men went on there till the end of voting at 4:00pm.

Zahirul Haq, a polling officer at booth no-2, said he had informed the presiding officer about the situation as he couldn't do anything.

Another polling officer, Kazi Selim, alleged that police did nothing to tackle the situation.

The presiding officer at the centre said he was busy keeping things under control.

Asked, some of Monirul's polling agents there said they didn't protest the ballot-stuffing for fear of reprisal from the ruling party men.

Around 1:30pm, several youths wearing badges with "boat" symbol asked this correspondent to leave the centre, saying polling was going on peacefully and there was nothing to report about.

One of them advised this correspondent to visit Ishak Government Primary School centre, alleging that BNP men had captured it and were stuffing ballot boxes there.

When this correspondent reached that centre at about 2:00pm, he found that police closed the entrance and were not allowing any voter to enter.

Later, police let this correspondent enter the centre after he gave them his identity.

This correspondent saw several groups of youths wearing badges inscribed with Anjum's photos take ballot papers from polling officers and stuff ballot boxes with those in at least 11 voting booths.

When this correspondent took photographs of ballot-stuffing by the youths at a booth with his mobile phone around 2:30pm, they forced him to leave the place.

Asked, Presiding Officer Sekhar Goswami said he called the returning officer and officials of law enforcement agencies, and informed them about the situation. But they didn't take any step.

Talking to this correspondent around 2:45pm, an executive magistrate, who was sitting in a car outside the centre, said he was not aware of any irregularities in polling at the centre. He refused to give his name.

Ruling party men allegedly stuffed ballot boxes also in other polling centres, including Comilla Modern School, Farida Biddalay, Gondhomoti Government Primary school, Saktola Government Primary School, Doiara Government Primary School, Bidyut Unyayan Board High School, Hazi Akramuddin High School, Neura High School and Munshi M Ali Girls High School.

[Our Comilla Correspondent contributed to this report]

Rab official Azad dies

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from a Singapore hospital where he had been taken on Sunday for better treatment.

Doctors at Mount Elizabeth Hospitals Singapore found him unfit to be operated on.

Azad had been kept at the CMH since he was brought back.

Splinters had pierced through one of his eyes and hit his brain, Azad's younger brother Yusuf Ahsan Hemel told this newspaper on Wednesday.

Azad left behind his wife, two sons and a daughter.

With his demise, the death toll in the twin blasts near the militant den at Sylhet's Atia Mahal rose to seven.

The explosion in which he was hit took place around an hour after a bomb went off around 7:00pm, about 400 metres north of Atia Mahal in Shibbari area where militants were holed up since March 24.

The two blasts left two police officials and four civilians dead and 44 others injured. Four militants were later killed in the operation led by Army commandos.

Azad was born on October 30, 1975, in Chapainawabganj.

He got admitted to the Economics department at Dhaka University, but left for a life in the army, according to Rab officials.

He was commissioned in East Bengal Regiment on June 7, 1996, following the 34th Bangladesh Military Academy (BMA) long course.

Azad served in several key posts in East Bengal Regiment-6, including that of IO, adjutant and quarter master, the officials said.

He later worked at the administration department of the army headquarters, Para Commando Battalion-1, and Support Battalion in East Bengal

Regiment-19. He was a commando.

Azad served as the company commander of Rab-12 from October 26 to December 30, 2011.

After that, he became a deputy director of intelligence wing (TFI Cell) in Rab headquarters and served there until December 7, 2013.

Azad was then promoted to director. He served in Rab for five years.

He was awarded Bangladesh Police Medal (service) in 2016.

Four drown

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Bandar River Outpost.

The vessel sank due to strong currents at Char Kishoreganj around 4:00pm, leaving the four drowned, he added.

The rest of the passengers managed to swim ashore.

The four bodies were fished out of the river. The dead are Sattar Miah, 40, his daughter Lamiya, 5, Zohra Begum, 60, and Kanchan Begum, 65, from the capital's Rampura.

Divers of Fire Service and Civil Defence and Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority were searching for the missing.

One of the survivors, Halim Bhandari, said his wife Banu Begum, mother-in-law Joygunnesa, sister-in-law Ranu Begum and her husband Shahjahan and Shahjahan's sister Shampa were missing.

Deceased Sattar's wife Shilpi Begum was among the missing, said family sources.

Shahinur Islam, upazila nirbahi officer of Sonargaon, said families of the dead will receive Tk 20,000 each from the Narayanganj district administration as financial assistance.

Eyes in the shadows

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those who are active at night. I pitched my tent before it was dark and waited for the moon to rise to take a stroll around.

Soon the moon appeared, spreading light across the plains and allowing us to walk without headlamps. Fireflies glittered along the creeks of water hyacinth. The Night Herons and Starlings flew into the sky like a storm of feathers as I walked through the dwarf trees.

Apart from stars, the moon and fireflies, a fourth light reflected closer to the ground: we only saw it when we lit our headlamps to locate a frog that was calling near the water. One of my colleagues spotted two glimmering eyes in the bush looking straight at us. The motionless eyes rested near the water. We realised that it was a wildcat and wanted to have a closer look. The cat did not change its position, even after noticing our movement on the other side of the creek.

A few Whistling Teals flushed and vanished into the dark line of tall trees in the distance. Not a single leaf moved, and suddenly the lowly night creatures stopped calling -- we were about to uncover the mystery behind the shining eyes in the dark.

We soon discovered that it was an adult fishing cat that had just come out of its den to hunt fish. Many nocturnal animals appear to have glowing eyes because the back of their eyeballs contain a layer of tissue called the *tapetum lucidum*, which helps animals to see better in low light. Unlike many other wildcat species, fishing cats love water and are largely dependent on wetlands for their survival.

This short, powerfully-built cat is about double the size of a domestic cat, but its global population is doing poorly. It is one of the most threatened wildcats of Asia and vanishing

rapidly from our wetlands due to habitat loss and indiscriminate killing.

In Bangladesh, they are known as *mechho bagh* or *mechho biral*, and are often killed by people in rural areas, possibly because they are seen as a threat to poultry, fisheries and even livestock, whereas fishing cats play a key role in maintaining healthy wetland ecosystem. Over the years, we have seen many photos of dead cats in newspapers that were beaten by village mobs, strangled or hung for display after being killed. It bothers me deeply that often villagers illegally kill these harmless cats for amusement.

FISHING CATS

DISAPPEARING FAST

In order to understand human-fishing cat conflicts, we analysed a total of 82 reports on fishing cats in national and local newspapers published between February 2010 and March 2013. This basic research revealed 30 confirmed deaths in just four years. Other reports included 18 "rescued-released" cases by the forest department, and the fate of other 38 cats remained unknown. In almost all cases of fishing cat mortalities, the causes of deaths were killing, snaring, captures and subsequent starvation.

In recent years, the Forest Department has done an excellent job in controlling illegal wildlife trade, especially in the case of wild birds. The department needs more resources to address this issue. However, I am hopeful that the department will be able to stop the indiscriminate killing and capture of fishing cats all over the country if its officials are provided with appropriate tools.

The writer is a Conservation Biologist and Ornithologist, currently working on threatened species conservation and research in Bangladesh and abroad.