



BIG DAY FOR THREE CITIES

Clockwise from top left, in Barisal, a cameraman of a private TV channel is carried away to the hospital after he was hit by brickbats thrown at a procession he was filming; in Sylhet, a young voter shows off ink on her thumb after casting her vote, and citizens queue up amid rain to exercise their democratic rights; in Rajshahi, supporters of the AL candidate sit under a canopy to assist voters with their voting slips (AL was the only political party seen to have such arrangement); and in Barisal, a voter is seen during a heated exchange of words with an election official, after waiting in line for hours and then finding ballots already stamped on the "boat" symbol.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN, RASHED SHUMON, SHEIKH NASIR, M JAHIRUL ISLAM JEWEL AND MASUK HRIDOY



RAJSHAHI

'My vote has no value'

Says BNP's mayoral candidate Bulbul

ANWAR ALI, AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR (TOP), RABIUL HASAN, BULBUL AHMED and ARAFAT RAHAMAN

Abul Berek looked hopeless as he was sitting outside a booth at Islamia College centre in Rajshahi city. "Ballot papers for mayoral candidates ran short," Berek said, adding, "They asked me to vote for councillors only and I refused. I'm waiting here for ballot papers." Berek ultimately could not cast his vote.

Two polling officers were sitting idle inside the booth as voters were refusing to vote without the ballot papers for mayoral candidates.

Another voter, Prof Mainul Alam of Agriculture faculty of Rajshahi University, could not vote either. "They gave me two ballot papers instead of three for mayor, general councillor and woman councillor," said Prof Mainul. "I am going home without voting," he said.

Hearing similar allegations since 11:00am yesterday, BNP's mayoral candidate Mosaddek Hossain Bulbul rushed to the vote centre around 12:00pm and blamed the presiding officer and law enforcers for stuffing ballot boxes before the voting began.

Law enforcers did not allow The Daily Star to speak to the presiding officer.

In a video footage, presiding officer Abdullahil Shafi was heard denying the allegations. He told other journalists, "We didn't run short of ballot papers, nor were the ballot boxes stuffed illegally. I am reissuing ballot papers to the booths."

Meanwhile, BNP's Bulbul staged a sit-in at the college ground and said he refrained from casting his own vote as a protest against the "state-sponsored irregularities".

"My vote has no value," he said.

He alleged that vote centres were occupied, BNP's polling agents were driven away, and there's a shortage of ballot papers. "Where will I complain? It's better that I sit here to protest," Bulbul said.

He sat on the grass in rain for four hours until voting ended at 4:00pm.

The Daily Star correspondents visited at least 24 vote centres where the presiding officers claimed that 50 percent of votes were cast by 11:30am. The correspondents found absence of polling agents of mayoral candidates other than Awami League's and some councillor candidates at three out of the 24 centres.

The correspondents could not enter four voting centres as law enforcers denied access. At five centres, the correspondents had to take the help of assistant returning officers to enter.

At Rajshahi Polytechnic Institute, police and presiding officers refused to allow the correspondents inside the voting centre. Later, Assistant Returning Officer (ARO) Shahidul Islam took them to different booths.

At one booth, the correspondents spotted an AL worker, Rashed, who said he was helping the "physically unwell" voters cast their votes. When the ARO was asked how he was allowed to do that, the official drove him out of the centre.

In another booth at the centre, an outsider along with officials fled at the sight of the correspondents.

The road to Chhoto Bongram Government Primary School centre was almost inaccessible for one hour till 11:00am due to crowds. Most of the people in the crowd were seen wearing badges with boat symbol. They were shouting slogans, asking to vote for boat.

A few Rab members were, how-

ever, seen dispersing the crowd while The Daily Star was broadcasting live from the spot.

At Seroil Colony High School, around 200 female voters gathered in queues around 6:30am, half an hour before the voting began.

Saui Ara, who was wearing a boat badge, said she brought several voters as per instruction. "We wanted to cast our votes early."

In the evening, at a press conference at the city AL office, AHM Khairuzzaman Liton said such a peaceful election is unprecedented. He said BNP spread lies and protested the election with an aim to taint it.

When contacted, independent candidate Murad Morshed said the election has become "questionable in many ways".

Morshed, also the district coordinator of Gana Samhati Andolon, said the situation around the voting centres was "terrifying" for voters as AL men were crowding the venues and shouting slogans.

Around 10:00am, BNP candidate Bulbul rushed to two voting centres at Seroil Government Boys' High School where 17 of his polling agents were allegedly forced out by police.

During visits to those centres, all 17 polling agents of BNP said they reached the venues at 6:30am, but the law enforcers forced them out and they could not enter the centres before 11:00am.

The presiding officers at the centres denied the allegations, saying that the BNP polling agents appeared at the centres late.

"Their allegations are false," said an assistant commissioner of police, Shamim, who was visiting the centres.

SYLHET

Voting marred by daylong turbulence

DWOHA CHOWDHURY, MINTU DESHWARA and MASUK HRIDOY

Sylhet, a city known to be a place of religious and political harmony, turned turbulent yesterday as citizens came to polling station to elect a mayor and ward councillors.

What should have been a festive atmosphere was marred by several incidents of ballot-snatching, taking control of polling booths and pushing agents out, clashes, assault on journalists as observed in some centres in the city.

Three correspondents and a photo-journalist of The Daily Star, assigned to cover the city corporation election, visited 52 centres of which such incidents were seen in 12.

Nothing significant was seen at the polling centres in the first two hours of voting, except for notable presence of female voters.

But around 10am, two separate incidents of taking control over three centres of two venues were observed.

Awami League candidate Badar Uddin Ahmed Kamran, along with some AL and BCL activists allegedly took over two centres at Khasdabir Govt Primary School venue of ward 5 at around 10am.

Soyful Alam Chowdhury and Md. Babur Rashid, presiding officers of the centres at the venue said chaos ensued when the AL candidate entered the venue with a large group of supporters.

Rasel Miah, a polling agent of BNP said that all the agents were pushed out from three polling booths, while Kamran entered one and others entered into two.

Soyful Alam Chowdhury said some 50 percent votes of the first lot of ballots (100 pieces ballot) were cast before the AL candidate entered.

Kamran and his group left the cen-

tre after ten minutes, but in that time all the other ballots were cast.

"After the chaotic situation, all remaining ballots of the three booths were finished and we had to stop polling for 50 minutes," he said.

At the same time, police temporarily detained four people at Sylhet Railway Government Primary School centre of ward 26 for snatching ballots, Harun-or-Rashid, inspector and duty officer of the centres said.

The Daily Star correspondents found flocks of supporters of AL candidate Kamran in and out of most of the centres.

Another curious incident was seen at the Kazi Jalal Uddin Multilateral Girls High School centres of ward 18 at around 11:15am. A group of miscreants entered the venue chanting "boat" (electoral symbol of AL). After they left, these correspondents found a lot of ballots ripped off on the floor, with all of them were sealed to "paddy sheaf" (electoral symbol of BNP mayoral candidate Ariful Haque Chowdhury).

Polling stopped for some time and then restarted after police took control over the centre by firing blank shots, Jahid Uddin, executive magistrate of EC said.

Another chaotic spot was three centres of Shahjalal Jamea Islamia Kamil Madrasa of ward 8. Starting at around 11:30am, two groups of AL-BCL activists in support of two rival councillor candidates entered the centres and locked into clash that closed voting for around 20 minutes.

Later, when the polling started again, another group entered a polling booth and started stuffing ballots for "boat", before police drove them off the venue.

Jamil Ahmed, presiding officer of one of the centres, however claimed everything was fine at his centre and something might be wrong in the

other centres, but The Daily Star could not talk to the other presiding officers.

At two centres of Nabin Chandra Govt Primary School of ward 20, voting was stopped for half an hour from 11:45am, as a group of miscreants forcefully entered the centres, forced all agents out and cast fake votes, Firoz Al Mamun, presiding officer of a centre said.

While visiting Habinandi Government Primary School, a cancelled centre of ward 27, a voter was seen standing in front of the room of presiding officer.

Khaled Chowdhury, a lawyer by profession, said "Some people cast a lot of votes by taking control of the centre; I am waiting to see whether they cast my vote or not."

A group of AL badge-holding activists entered and took over the Amberkhana Dargah Gate Govt Primary School centre of ward 17, at around 2pm. BNP polling agents on duty alleged that Misbah Uddin Siraj, organising secretary, and Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury, general secretary of Sylhet district AL were present in the centre while AL activists forced all polling agents out.

At the centre, Mesbah Uddin, a journalist of Bangla daily Prothom Alo was severally beaten up by police and AL supporters for taking photos of the scenario.

Mahfuz-uz-Zaman, presiding officer of the centre said, "I don't know whether I am in charge of the polling centre or in charge of clashes!"

Voting at two centres of the city was cancelled, as miscreants snatched ballots, stuffed boxes and caused chaos.

The centres are Gazi Burhan Uddin Government Primary School of ward 24, and Habinandi Government Primary School of ward 27, Proloy Kumar Saha, assistant returning officers said.

BARISAL

No violence required: Open ballot stuffing by AL men

SOHRAB HOSSAIN, SHUSANTA GHOSH, M JAHIRUL ISLAM JEWEL and HABIBUR RAHMAN

Since the voting started at 8am yesterday, seven to eight ruling party men wearing tags of the "boat" symbol occupied each of the five polling booths for men at Kaladema Government Primary School in Barisal city.

Within the next half an hour, 198 votes were cast and all the voters were forced to vote for Awami League's mayoral candidate. Two correspondents of The Daily Star present at the centre for half an hour since the voting started witnessed the incident.

The centre has 1,605 votes. No polling agents for other mayoral candidates were seen around the booths.

Asked about the irregularities, presiding officer of the centre Md Ibrahim denied any such incident.

About the absence of polling agents, he said, "The polling agents came in the morn-

ing. But I don't know where they are now."

He rather asked the correspondents to leave the polling centre after taking photos.

Some of the AL activists who were forcing the voters to vote for AL, however, left the polling centre as a mobile team of law enforcers visited the centre around 8:20am. They came back within five minutes after the team left and started forcing the voters again.

Al Amin, a voter of the centre, said he saw AL men obstructing voters, who were known as supporters of other parties, on their way to the centre.

Visiting four booths of Kashipur Government Primary School centre at 9:15am, the correspondents found that AL men, wearing the same "boat" symbol tags, snatched away ballots from voters, stamped and dropped those in the ballot box. Voters, however, were allowed to choose councillor candidates as per their choice.

During half an hour visit at the centre, the correspondent found that at least 10 voters were forced to give away their ballot papers to the AL men.

At Kashipur High School and College centre, the correspondents witnessed similar incidents - they saw at least 10 voters being forced to hand over the ballot papers of mayoral candidates, which the AL men later stamped.

Shahjahan Miridha, a voter of the centre, said AL men forced him to vote for the ruling party mayoral candidate.

Another voter at the centre, Nanna, said there was no point of going to the polling centre as there was no scope for choosing a candidate.

In both centres, no agent of BNP mayoral candidate Mujibur Rahman Sarwar was found.

Six correspondents of this newspaper visited 36 centres, out of the total 123. BNP's polling agents were seen in only three centres and they even left

the centres after 9:30am.

The correspondents noticed a large number of ruling party supporters around the polling centres who barred known BNP supporters from entering the centres.

AL activists also asked the journalists not to take photographs, both inside and outside the polling centres.

Anwarul Haque Tarin, assistant general secretary of Barisal city BNP, said the ruling party men forced their agents out of the polling centres.

Around 8:40am at Imam Gazzali Academy Dakhil Madrasa under ward 30, at least two women alleged that AL men accompanied them up to the booth for casting votes and forced them to stamp on the boat symbol.

One of the correspondents witnessed at least two such incidents at the centre.

Ruling party men were seen entering the centre before the very eyes of law enforcers without any obstacle. They

also asked journalists to leave the centre.

Mostafizur Rahman, presiding officer of the polling centre, denied any irregularities.

At Government Barisal College centre under ward 19, a large number of under-aged boys were found standing in queues to cast votes at 8:05am. As several dozen journalists visited the centre, they left the spot.

AL candidate Serniabat Sadiq Abdullah cast his vote at the centre. Within half an hour, 116 votes were cast at the centre.

At Sahara Institute of Technology under ward 26, AL men stuffed ballot boxes in front of journalists and the presiding officer around 11am. Till 11am, 630 votes out of 1,715 were cast there. But presiding officer Manjur Sohel denied any such irregularities.

Mahbubur Rahman, a voter from Jagua High School and College centre, said he returned home without casting

his vote as some youths asked him to vote for "boat".

The presiding officer of Syada Majidunnesa High School centre suspended voting as ruling party men from outside occupied the centre and stuffed ballot boxes.

Vote taking at Barisal City College centre under ward 17 remained suspended for half an hour from 12:30pm as ruling party men snatched ballot papers from one of the booths. Monirul Islam, presiding officer of the centre, confirmed the matter.

Md Helal Uddin, assistant polling officer of Barisal City Corporation polls, refused to make any comment over the irregularities at the polling centres.

During the polls no serious violence occurred in the city. Different law enforcement agencies including Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and magistrates were seen patrolling.