

WEATHER FORECAST

YESTERDAY'S TEMPERATURES

DHAKA H 23.1 L 14.3	MYMENSINGH H 24.3 L 14.0	CHATTOGRAM H 25.4 L 16.0	SYLHET H 26.0 L 14.6	RAJSHAH H 23.2 L 11.2	RANGPUR H 24.5 L 11.8	KHULNA H 23.2 L 12.4	BARISHAL H 24.5 L 11.8	COX'S BAZAR H 23.5 L 18.2
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Weather may remain dry with partly cloudy sky over the country in next 24 hours till 6:00pm today, UNB said quoting the Met office. Moderate to thick fog may occur at places over the country during mid-night to morning. **The sun sets in the capital today at 05:16pm and rises tomorrow at 6:37am.**

A deplorable practice

Children being used in political campaigns

MUNTAKIM SAAD and SHAHEEN MOLLAH

About 200 teenagers were found shouting slogans near the IBA Hostel in Farmgate on Sunday to drum up public support for Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, Awami League candidate for Dhaka-12.

Party activists were telling the boys to chant the slogan "Kamal bhai er agomon, shubhecchha shagotom".

This is not an isolated case. Children in political rallies, chanting slogans and distributing leaflets, for national polls candidates has become all too common in Dhaka lately – a blatant violation of child rights.

On Victory Day, some 100 children were seen rallying for AL's Dhaka-15 candidate Kamal Ahmed Majumder in Shewrapara area. According to locals, they were brought from slums and offered small sums of money and food in exchange of their labour.

Children and teenagers are being engaged in political campaigns as they are easy to manipulate, according to rights activists.

What's more disconcerting is that this practice is turning fatal. At least 28 children were killed and over 100 injured in political violence over the last six years, according to Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF).

The Election Commission and law enforcement agencies have been turning a blind eye to this exploitation, rights activists claim.

These children – coming from low-income

families – are paid Tk 200-500 per day to participate in political events, shout slogans, put up posters and distribute leaflets.

Twelve year old Babu (not his real name) was found handing out leaflets for BNP's Dhaka-13 candidate Abdus Salam on a bus in Mohammadpur on December 13. The leaflet read, "How to cast your vote for 'sheaf of paddy' using Electronic Voting Machine".

Babu said he was promised Tk 200 for giving out 500 leaflets. Asked why the adults were not doing this, he responded, "Out of fear."

"If the elders do this, they might get beaten up," Babu said, adding, "Giving out leaflets of 'sheaf of paddy' also makes me scared."

Mohammadpur is the neighbourhood where two teenagers – Arif Hossain, 14, and Mohammad Sujon, 17 – were killed during an intra-party feud just a month ago.

Leaders of Awami League claimed that the victims were their "unit members" but a number of teenagers who were with Arif and Sujon, and witnessed the incident, claimed that they were hired for Tk 300 for the day.

A Jubo League leader was out on bail, hours after he was picked up in connection with the deaths of the teenagers.

With a heavy heart, Arif's father Faruq Mia, a rickshaw-puller, said he neither had the financial ability nor necessary connections to seek justice. He, however, added

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A child distributes leaflets while her father rides a bicycle modelled after a boat, electoral symbol of Awami League. Though prohibited, using children in election campaign has become all too common ahead of the polls. The photo was taken near Jatiya Press Club yesterday.

Parties sacrificing ideologies for political strategy

Eminent citizens say at programmes

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Eminent citizens yesterday called upon the country's voters not to cast for communalist candidates and shun anti-Liberation War forces, irrespective of the political parties they belong to.

At separate programmes, they reiterated the call for banning Jamaat-e-Islami as a political party.

Some politicians who claim to be "pro-Liberation War" have allowed war criminals to use them as "shield" for contesting the polls -- apparently to "re-establish good governance" in the country, Liberation War Museum Trustee Sarwar Ali told a discussion at the capital's Jatiya Press Club.

"This is unacceptable," he said.

Ideologies of political parties, including the ruling Awami League, are constantly being defeated by their political tactics and strategies, he added.

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VIOLENCE ON MINORITIES

Election brings back trauma for survivors

BISHAKHA DEVNATH

It has now been over a month that Bhajan (not the real name) travelled to Munshiganj with his family. He doesn't get enough work to make a living there, but he feels it is safer than his home in Monirampur of Jashore ahead of the upcoming national election.

Newly-wed Bhajan and his wife used to live in a small hut in a remote place between Monirampur and adjacent Abhoynagar upazila five years back. Some 9-10 people attacked the couple and another Hindu family the night after voting for the 2014 national election ended.

"Nothing happened earlier to alert us. We were completely caught off-guard," Bhajan said over the phone last week.

On that fateful night of January 5, 2014, Bhajan's wife and another woman of the family next door were raped.

Why did they become a target? Bhajan said, "They [attackers] were asking us, 'Did you go to cast your vote?'"

As the next day's sun appeared on the horizon laying bare their wounds and humiliation, the families left their homes with whatever belongings they had, and went to live in a relative's house temporarily in another upazila.

Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee, a forum for secular Bangladesh and trial of war criminals, has identified 61 places across the country including Monirampur and Abhoynagar, where it fears that minorities, especially Hindus, may be attacked in polls-related violence this time.

It is assumed that members of the Hindu community vote for "boat", election symbol of the ruling Awami League, said Shahriar Kabir, president of Nirmul Committee. "So activists and supporters of BNP-Jamaat swoop on the minority community." There were attacks around the 2001 national election on the minority community, on a large scale.

Hindu voters account for between 12 and 48 percent of all voters in the localities vulnerable to pre- and post-polls communal attacks, according to data assembled by Nirmul Committee.

Those who are poor and belong to lower castes like Dalits and Harijans are at highest risk of communal attacks, Shahriar added.

Determined to not allow incidents like those of 2014 to repeat, Nirmul Committee in recent months communicated the gravity of safety issue to the Election Commission and the National Human Rights Commission.

In a letter to the NHRC on November 13, it said that though communally-charged campaigning is prohibited before election, Jamaat-e-Islami and like-minded parties use religion to gain political advantage.

They deliver political speeches at waz mahfils (religious gatherings) and during sermons before Jumma prayers. "They create the grounds for violence by running hate campaigns against the history and spirit of the Liberation War, Bangladesh's constitution, women, free thinkers and other religions," Shahriar Kabir said.

In response, the NHRC wrote to the EC, suggesting that it should take special supervisory measures in the vulnerable areas and resist attacks on religious minorities, women and transgender voters before and after polls.

Not leaving the matter only to the authorities, Nirmul Committee has already formed 52 "communal violence prevention committees" in as many risky areas. It aims to have one such committee in every vulnerable area, headed by respected people of the localities like imams of mosques, priests of temples and school teachers.

One legal aid committee and one medical aid committee will also be ready to mobilise support from districts to victims of any violence and attack, Shahriar said.

In a recent programme, Prime Minister's International Affairs Adviser Gowher Rizvi promised that police and administration would be on high alert to foil any attack on minorities in the run-up to December 30 polls and afterwards.

All these assurances, however, fall flat with survivors of previous attacks -- like Bhajan -- scrambling for refuge.

January 2014 was the last time his family left the village, scarred for life. As time closes in on the 11th national election, the couple, who have a three-year-old girl now, have taken preemptive measures, even if it meant leaving their jobs at Noapara Jute Mill in Abhoynagar.

Silence resonates through Bhajan's empty house, that the government built for them weeks after the 2014 attack.

Zaker Party unveils polls manifesto

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Zaker Party, an ally of ruling Awami League (AL), yesterday announced its election manifesto, pledging to build a progressive Bangladesh by tackling militancy and ensuring human rights.

The party held a press conference at a hotel in Dhaka, where its Chairman Mostafa Amir Faisal presented the manifesto, titled "Oaths of Change" that highlighted a total of 41 points, said a press release.

Zaker Party's Senior Vice-Chairman Saim Amir Faisal and Acting General Secretary Ejajur Rasul were present at the event, among others.

Riva Ganguly new Indian envoy to Bangladesh

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Senior Indian diplomat Riva Ganguly Das has been appointed as the next high commissioner of India to Bangladesh. She is replacing High Commissioner Harsh Vardhan Shringla, who has been shifted to Washington as India's new ambassador to the United States.



"Ms Riva Ganguly Das, presently director general, ICCR [Indian Council for Cultural Relations] has been appointed as the next high commissioner of India to the People's Republic of Bangladesh. She is expected to take up the assignment shortly," a statement issued by India's external affairs ministry said yesterday.

Born on December 24, 1961, Riva Ganguly obtained her master's degree in political science from Delhi University where she also taught the subject before joining the foreign service.

She served as head of the cultural wing of the Indian High Commission in Dhaka. She was also posted in Spain and was the deputy head of the Indian embassy in The Hague and ambassador to Romania.

HC refuses to hear petition challenging legality of polls

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A High Court bench yesterday refused to hear a writ petition filed by SC lawyer Advocate Eunus Ali Akond, challenging the legality of declaring schedule and holding the national polls without dissolving the parliament.

The bench of Justice FRM Nazmul Ahasan and Justice Razik-Al-Jalil refused to hear the petition, saying that the bench has no jurisdiction to hear it.

After the bench refused to hear his petition, Advocate Eunus said he would move it before another HC bench.

On November 25, Advocate Eunus filed the petition.

In the petition, Advocate Eunus prayed to the HC to stay the 11th national polls, slated for December 30, as holding polls without dissolving the parliament will be unconstitutional.

According to Article 123(3) of the constitution, national polls should be held within 90 days of dissolving the parliament, he said.

However, the EC announced the polls schedule while the current parliament is still not dissolved, Advocate Eunus said, adding, "...the national election is being held in breach of the constitution."

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3 out of 100 take drugs in country: survey

New narcotics law comes into effect Dec 27, says home minister

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The newly passed "Narcotics Control Act 2018" will come into effect from December 27 and all the law enforcement agencies will join hands to collectively act against narcotics, said Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan yesterday.

Before, narcotics smugglers used to dodge the law enforcers' eyes or come out of jail using loopholes in the law but they will not get that opportunity in the new law, he added.

The minister was addressing a workshop on Narcotics Control Act 2018 at the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) headquarters in Dhaka as chief guest.

In the new law, there will be provision for death sentence or life-term imprisonment if anyone is found carrying more than 200 grams of yaba or more than 25 grams of heroin or cocaine, he said.

The minister said new narcotics are coming into the country from the neighbouring ones and youths are becoming its

PREVALENCE OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE

- Among all age groups (7 years and above): **2.8%**
- 18+ years: **3.3%**
- 7-12 years: **0.2%**
- 12-18 years: **0.8%**
- 18-27 years: **6.9%**

GENDER DISTRIBUTION

- Substance use by male: **4.8%**
- Substance use by female: **0.6%**

RATIO OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE

- Cannabis: **42.5%**
- Alcohol: **38.8%**
- Amphetamine: **13.5%**
- Other: **5.2%**

RATIO OF USERS BY PROFESSION

- Worker: **6.7%**
- Unemployed: **5.7%**
- Businessman: **4.3%**
- Farmer: **3.8%**
- Service: **3.5%**

RATIO OF USERS IN DIVISIONS

- Dhaka: **36.80%**
- Chattogram: **24.90%**
- Rangpur: **13.90%**
- Rajshahi: **7.10%**
- Sylhet: **6.90%**
- Khulna: **6.20%**
- Barishal: **4.10%**

SOURCE: NIMH

biggest victims. The numbers of (narcotics) users are also rising, he said.

At least three out of 100 people in Bangladesh consume narcotics, the first ever official survey of the country revealed. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) published the report recently after a yearlong survey, from July 2017 to June 2018.

According to the report, around 3.3 percent youths (in the age group 18 and above) are taking drugs, while the figure is one percent between the age group of 7-18.

"We have conducted the survey after collecting door-to-door data in seven divisions and the total number of participants were 19,662," Prof Dr Helal Uddin Ahmed of NIMH told The Daily Star.

Presently, there are around 10.42 crore voters in the country, according to the Election Commission. As per the NIMH statistics, around 34.38 lakh people are taking drugs in the country.

The home minister further said they

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