



Dhaka-4 BNP candidate Salauddin Ahmed talks to a reporter in front of his house in Shyampur yesterday. Salauddin alleged that he could not campaign as police and ruling party men took position nearby. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Now local

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Thursday," EWG Chairman Abdul Awal told The Daily Star. "Democracywatch, Coast Trust and Jagarani Chakra Foundation have informed us that they will not monitor the election," he added. He further said that the rest have taken the decision to reduce their number of local observers due to the lack of foreign funding. Asked about the shortage of funds, Awal said development partners were losing interest in funding election observation missions across the world. "This can be one reason," he said. Their priorities for Bangladesh are also changing. Many development partners are now channeling funds for the Rohingya refugees, he added. Awal estimated that the seven organisations that got the NOC from the NGO Affairs Bureau would deploy around 5,700 local observers. While the remaining twelve will deploy around 700 local observers even though they got the EC's approval for 9,300 observers, he added.

Executive Director of Jagarani Chakra Foundation Azadul Kabir and Assistant Director of Coast Trust Mostafa Kamal Akond said they were withdrawing from all election monitoring activities this time due to lack of funds and to avoid all debates and misunderstandings raised. HT Imam, co-chairman of Awami League Election Steering Committee, on December 25, demanded that the Election Commission withdraw permission given to nine local election observer organisations, as most of the observers were "activists of the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami". The organisations are: Democracywatch, Khan Foundation, Light House, Bangladesh Manobadhikar Somonnoy Parishad, Jagarani Chakra, Nobolok, Coast Trust, Shariatpur Development Society and Noakhali Rural Development Society.

EC Joint Secretary SM Asaduzzaman said they approved 25,920 local observers from 81 organisations to monitor the election. These organisations applied for the approval of 34,671 local observers, according to EC sources.

Around 1.6 lakh domestic and 600 international observers monitored the 2008 election. About 2.18 lakh domestic and 225 international observers monitored the 2001 election.

However, the number of voters and polling stations are much higher this time than in 2008.

In the 2001 polls, 29,978 polling centres were set up for 7.50 crore voters. In 2008, there were 35,263 polling centres for 8.1 crore voters. For Sunday's election, around 40,183 polling stations will be set up for more than 10.41 crore electorates.

HC questions

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independents. During yesterday's hearing, lawyer Tania Amir told the court that the HC in a verdict in 2013 had declared Jamaat's registration with the EC illegal.

The HC verdict is still in force and the 25 leaders have not resigned from the party. Therefore, they cannot be allowed to contest the election, she said. Jamaat's appeal challenging the HC verdict is pending with the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, but the Jamaat leaders taking part in the election have not informed the EC about it, which is an obvious fraudulence, she argued.

Ruhul Quddus Kazzal, lawyer for two of the Jamaat leaders, said the candidates were not running as Jamaat men. Therefore, there is no legal bar for them to contest.

Danger level

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Augusta Hotel in hard-hit Carita. "I've already left."

Sukma, a security guard at the shattered Mutiara Carita Cottages, added: "Just please pray for us and that everything will be okay."

A section of the crater -- which emerged at the site of the Krakatoa volcano, whose massive 1883 eruption killed at least 36,000 people -- collapsed after an eruption and slid into the ocean, triggering Saturday night's killer wave.

Before and after satellite images taken by Japan's space agency showed that a two square kilometre chunk of the volcanic island had collapsed into the water.

At least 430 people were killed in the disaster, with 1,495 people injured and another 159 were missing.

Nearly 22,000 people have been evacuated and are living in shelters.

On Wednesday evening, the disaster agency said that wind was blowing "ash and sand" from the volcano to the nearby towns of Cilegon and Serang on Java, and advised residents to wear masks and glasses if they had to venture outdoors.

EARLY WARNING SYSTEM
Torrential rains have sparked flooding in some areas, hampering the relief effort and heaping more misery on the stricken region, as thousands cram emergency shelters.

Medical workers have warned that clean water and medicine supplies were running low -- stoking fears of a public health crisis.

Indonesia, a vast Southeast Asian archipelago, is one of the most disaster-hit nations on Earth due to its position straddling the so-called Pacific Ring of Fire, where tectonic plates collide.

The tsunami was Indonesia's third

US man

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In an Instagram post, he explained his journey ended upon crossing the edge of the Ross Ice Shelf: the point where Antarctica's land mass ends. It lies at the head of Ross Sea, a deep bay of the Southern Ocean.

"I accomplished my goal: to become the first person in history to traverse the continent of Antarctica coast to coast solo, unsupported and unaided," O'Brady wrote in an Instagram post after covering the final 77.5 miles in 32 hours.

"While the last 32 hours were some of the most challenging hours of my life, they have quite honestly been some of the best moments I have ever experienced," he wrote.

"I was locked in a deep flow state the entire time, equally focused on the end goal, while allowing my mind to recount the profound lessons of this journey. I'm delirious writing this as I haven't slept yet."

His voyage was tracked by GPS, and live updates of the trip were provided daily on his website colinobradycor.

O'Brady and an Englishman, army Captain Louis Rudd, 49, set off individually on November 3 from Union Glacier in a bid to be the first to complete a solo, unassisted crossing of Antarctica.

In 1996-97, a Norwegian polar explorer, Borge Ousland, made the first solo crossing of Antarctica but he was wind-aided by kites on his voyage.

O'Brady and Rudd set off on cross-country skis dragging sleds called pulks which weighed nearly 400 pounds (180 kilograms).

O'Brady reached the South Pole on December 12, the 40th day of his journey.

He arrived at the finish point on the Ross Ice Shelf on the Pacific Ocean on Wednesday after covering a total of 921 miles.

major natural disaster in six months, following a series of powerful earthquakes on the island of Lombok in July and August and a quake-tsunami in September that killed around 2,200 people in Palu on Sulawesi island, with thousands more missing and presumed dead.

The disaster agency has said it installed new sensors to better monitor tremors at the volatile volcano.

The agency initially said there was no tsunami threat at all, even as the killer wave crashed ashore.

It was later forced to issue a correction and an apology as it pointed to a lack of early warning systems for the high death toll.

One of the hardest-hit areas -- Tanjung Lesung -- is on a list of 10 destinations that Jakarta wants to turn into another Bali, the holiday island hotspot which draws millions of tourists annually.

"We need to have (tsunami) early warning systems, especially in tourist destinations," Indonesia's tourism minister Arief Yahya said yesterday.

"We're going to make that happen."

Fear that won't

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"We had filed a case in connection with the arson attack and killing of an elderly man in Muhuri Para, but it saw no progress in five years. Police also failed to arrest anyone involved in the incident," he added.

Visiting Madhyam Kanchana in Satkania on Monday, this newspaper found three elderly people discussing the latest polls situation at a pharmacy.

One of them was Pulak Ghosh who came to the area from Chattogram city for some family functions. He expressed concern about the probable post-polls situation.

City resident Anindya Nandi, who was preparing to go to Madhyam Kanchana to cast his vote, said the recent attack on the convoy of the Jatiya Party candidate in Banskhali created panic among the villagers.

"As the members of the Hindu community, we are always branded a vote bank of a particular party. It's not the proper way to judge us. Such labeling as vote bank infuriates the BNP-Jamaat supporters and we become their target," said Anindya.

Rumi Ghosh, a trader in the city, said she would not travel to her in-law's home in Bathuapara of Anwara upazila to cast vote for fear of violence.

Nitai Prasad Das, general secretary of Bangladesh Hindu-Bouddha Christian Oikya Parishad in Chattogram, said the overall law and order situation in the district was good, but some areas in Banskhali, Satkania and Sitakunda were still vulnerable to violence.

The Oikya Parishad during separate meetings with police, Rapid Action Battalion and intelligence agencies has expressed concern over the recent violence in those areas, he added.

"They ensured us of maintaining law and order through deployment of strike forces in those areas," he added.

According to Oikya Parishad statistics, Chittagong-16 (Banskhali) has 12.82 percent voters from the minority community while the figure for the community in Chittagong-14 (Satkania-Chandnaish) is 12.6 percent.

Mustafizur Rahman Chowdhury of AL, Jafrul Islam Chowdhury of BNP, Mahmudul Islam Chowdhury of Jatiya Party and independent candidate Jahurul Islam, a Jamaat leader, are contesting the polls in Chittagong-16.

In Chittagong-15 (Lohagora, part of Satkania), the AL has fielded Abu Reza Muhammad Nezamuddin Nadvi while Jamaat leader ANM Shamsul Islam is running on BNP's ticket.

France stops 11 migrants crossing English Channel

AFP, Lille

French maritime authorities intercepted 11 migrants trying to cross the English Channel in an inflatable boat early yesterday, one of a rising number of attempts despite freezing winter temperatures.

Five of the migrants were suffering from hypothermia.

French gendarmes picked up the group 15 nautical miles (28 kilometres) northwest of Calais in the early hours after several ships raised the alarm.

Mobile

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The BTRC, however, hasn't said anything about broadband services.

According to BTRC data, there were 57.35 lakh broadband connections in November.

On Wednesday, the BTRC in a meeting with the International Internet Gateway representatives said social media sites, especially Facebook, would be blocked if needed.

EC Secretary Helal Uddin Ahmed Earlier told reporters two weeks ago that they would consider completely blocking mobile internet during the polls.

BTRC engineers also visited the mobile operators' offices and examined how long it would take to block the services.

On Monday, the EC asked the BTRC to prepare to block 3G and 4G services and social media sites for three days, including December 30.

The BTRC had also formed a team to stay at its office round the clock and act if any unlawful online activity is detected, officials said.

During the demonstrations for safe roads in August, the BTRC slowed down internet speed for almost 24 hours.

Mock voting

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In Rangpur-3, the voting was arranged at 175 polling stations in Rangpur City Corporation, reports our Dinajpur correspondent.

Jonayed Hossain, presiding officer of Lion School and College centre, said the presence of voters was slim although it was a practice session for the voters to cast their votes using the EVMS.

Shapla Saha said she did not face any difficulties in casting her vote.

In Khulna-2, the mock voting was held in all 157 polling stations of the constituency.

Sahabuddin Ahmed, a voter, said his wife went to Khulna Zilla School centre for taking part in the voting, but he could not go as he was busy with another work.

Talking to our Khulna correspondent, Returning Officer of Khulna Helal Hossain said the mock voting would help the voters of the constituency vote through the EVMS on the election day.

JP leader

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Sanowar said he would remain in the race with "boat", the AL's election symbol.

He told The Daily Star that the prime minister did not ask them to cast vote for "plough", the JP's election symbol. She wanted to see the victory of all the AL candidates in Tangail, he added.

I am back for sister

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"My condition is not good. I am back for my sister Sheikh Hasina," he said at the briefing around 5:00pm. "We are happy with the existing atmosphere for the election. A free and fair election will be held in the country."

He said apart from the grand alliance candidates, those who are still running under the JP banner must quit the race for the sake of the alliance.

"We all will have to work unitedly to ensure victory of the alliance."

He said the grand alliance would surely win as "the BNP's history was not good".

Earlier, Farooque had visited Ershad at his home seeking his blessings.

Interestingly, a JP press release sent around 9:00pm and signed by Ershad claimed that he was misquoted by different media outlets.

"Except the seats of grand alliance, Jatiya Party candidates will contest freely in their respective constituencies with plough, the electoral symbol of the Jatiya Party," the statement said.

"No one will quit the election race. They [JP leaders] were instructed to remain on the election field," Ershad was quoted as saying in the statement.

Talking to The Daily Star earlier in the day, JP Presidium Member SM Faysal Chisti said, "This election will be very tough and competitive. If each of the Jatiya Party candidates gets at least five to six thousand votes, it can create problems for the grand alliance candidates. That's why the party chairman took the decision [of supporting grand alliance candidates]."

But the stance of Ershad and his party on the issue was different two weeks ago.

Aggrieved at getting only 29 seats from the ruling AL, the JP on December 9, the last date for withdrawal of nomination papers, decided to field its candidates in 145 other constituencies.

Of the 145, at least 100 constituencies will see the AL face its ally JP alongside the BNP-led opposition alliances.

It means those 145 seats are open to the partners of the grand alliance. Whoever wins can later be part of the combine if it forms the government.

According to the lists submitted to the Election Commission, the AL is contesting in 258 seats, Workers Party in five, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Inu) and Bikalpadhara Bangladesh in three each, Tarikat Federation and Jatiya Party (Manju) in two each, and Bangladesh Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Ambia) in one.

So, the JP has actually been given 27 seats, since it would have an AL challenger in Kurigram-1 and a Workers Party rival in Barisal-3, added the leaders.

The AL did not agree to give Kurigram-1 to JP and tried to make the Workers Party happy by giving it Barisal-3, sources in the ruling party said.

Ershad had been disappointed as the AL nominated Farooque in Dhaka-17, one of the two constituencies Ershad was to run from.

Intimidation

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"Your party men are converting the villagers by force," Anarul uttered aloud, adding that he too was a victim of AL's coercion a few days back.

He alleged that AL activists had surrounded him while he was taking tea at a tea-stall in the area recently.

They forced him to chant the "Joy Bangla" slogan and threatened him of dire consequences if he would not vote for "boat," he claimed.

"It occurred in broad daylight. I was compelled to do what they asked me to," he said.

Claiming that Anarul's claims were "false", Mohammad Jarjis, one of the AL activists, said at least 25 BNP men from the adjacent Kanthalpara village had "willingly" joined the AL a few days ago.

They not only joined the AL but also paid the local ruling party men for holding a concert on December 25 "without any kind of force, Jarjis added".

Abul Kalam, another AL man, said "I see no problem in the village as both AL and BNP men are campaigning side by side."

Anarul dissented once again and said at least two tea-stalls belonging to BNP supporters were torched in the neighbouring Bhalam village during the early hours of December 26 to terrorise the BNP supporters in the area.

He also claimed the AL men had been intimidating villagers saying they [AL men] would keep an eye on who they vote for.

At this point, Jarjis told Anarul, "We must be watchful about them as they joined our party pledging to vote for us."

Anarul stopped the argument at this point and left the spot soon after noticing that he was receiving harsh rebuke while being surrounded by a couple of

On December 3, following seat-sharing negotiations with the AL, Ershad replaced JP Secretary General ABM Ruhul Amin Hawlader with state minister for LGRD Moshir Rahman Ranga.

JP insiders said Ershad brought the sudden change to get an edge in the negotiations as Ranga had good relationships with government high-ups.

But getting only 29 seats disappointed the JP chief, they said yesterday.

Five days after Hawlader was replaced, Ershad appointed him as his special assistant with the status "next to the JP chairman".

After over two weeks of "medical check-up" in a Singapore hospital, Ershad returned Wednesday night.

He, for the first time since December 6, appeared before the public yesterday. His absence during almost the entire campaign raised many questions.

Ershad, known as an unpredictable character in the political arena, has a record of playing mysterious roles.

In the middle of November, Ershad became unreachable for most of the party ranks for several days as he stayed in a house at Gulshan instead of his residence in Baridhara.

In 2006, he went into hiding facing pressure from the then ruling BNP to join its alliance. On December 18 that year, he suddenly appeared at a Paltan Maidan rally organised by AL, and announced his decision to join the AL-led alliance.

Ershad led his party to remain in the AL-led grand alliance to contest the 9th parliamentary election in 2008, held two years behind schedule due to the state of emergency declared amid political turmoil.

In the 2014 national election, Ershad announced that the JP would not participate in the election and asked his party's candidates to withdraw their nomination papers.

Raising questions and confusions, he was taken to the CMH from his Baridhara residence on December 12, 2013.

However, a section of JP leaders decided to join the polls. The party chairman was elected as a lawmaker in the January 5 polls as he could not withdraw his candidacy from Rangpur-3.

From CMH, where he had been staying for unknown "illness", Ershad directly went to the Bangabhaban to attend the oath-taking ceremony of the prime minister and ministers of the new government on January 12, 2014.

On the same day, he was appointed special envoy of the prime minister with the status of a minister. Three of his party lawmakers were inducted into the council of ministers.

In the wake of criticism against his party for being in the opposition and in the cabinet at the same time, Ershad on several occasions in recent years said he would ask the three party men to step down as ministers paving the way for JP to emerge as the real opposition.

the AL supporters.

From Sumon's shop, this correspondent went to Kanthalpara village nearby where he learnt that most of some 750 voters there were supporters of the AL.

The village had at least 25 homeowners who were believed to be the BNP supporters until December 25, the day when they joined the ruling AL in presence of the party candidate in the constituency and lawmaker Ayeen Uddin.

"We joined the ruling party because we thought it would be favourable for us," Altaf said, adding that these 25 families would account for some 150 votes.

At Bhalam village nearby, this correspondent found one Abdul Kuddus and his son Jewel Rana were rebuilding their road-side tea stall.

A BNP election campaign office beside them was also seen bearing the marks of vandalism.

"Reported by a villager, I rushed here around 2:00am on December 26 and found my tea-stall torched," said Abdul.

Jewel Rana, another college student, said, "I think the attack was carried out because of our family's support for BNP".

Shafiqul Haque Milon, the BNP candidate in the constituency, said several identified group of AL men had been roaming around the villages and terrorising villagers on a regular basis.

AL candidate Ayeen Uddin, however, denied any such allegations and said that BNP men were terrorising voters by burning AL offices at Duari, Majhigram and Sreepur villages.

"We asked our men to remain calm, but some minor incidents occurred as it is difficult to keep them calm in the face of continuous provocations from the BNP men," he added.