

## Election was peaceful

Foreign observers say after visiting 5 polling stations in Dhaka

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

A team of foreign election observers said they witnessed calm and peaceful election at different polling centres in the capital yesterday.

"We have visited a number of polling stations... and as far as the perception goes there was calm, serene and ambience in the polling stations," said Aariz Aftab, chief electoral officer of West Bengal.

Talking to reporters at the end of voting, he said, "...a lot of gaiety was visible. Whatever we've perceived I think it was very meticulous planning and meticulous organisation by the Bangladesh Election Commission.

"We hope that through this visit the relationship between the EC of India and EC of Bangladesh will be strengthened... this is to carry forward good and cordial relationship between the election commissions of the two countries," Aariz Aftab added.

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## AL believes in democracy: Hasina

BSS, Dhaka

Awami League believes in democracy and has faith in the people, the party's president Sheikh Hasina said yesterday morning, after casting her vote. "We will accept whatever decision the people will make."

Replying to a journalist's query at Dhaka City College polling centre in the capital's Dhanmondi, she said she was absolutely confident that her party would be victorious in the 11th parliamentary polls.

"I'm always confident about our victory in the election... I trust my people and I know that they will choose us so they can get a better future," she said.

Hasina arrived at the centre around 7:55am amid tight security, and cast her ballot on the second floor at around 8:00am.

The premier's sister Sheikh Rehana, daughter Saima Wazed Hossain and nephew Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh, the candidate from AL in Dhaka-10 constituency, accompanied her to the centre.

About the election atmosphere in the country, the AL president said after coming to power, her party has always tried to hold elections peacefully. "We've created a congenial atmosphere so that people can cast their votes without any hindrance," she said. However, mentioning several incidents in which 10 leaders and workers of AL were killed by BNP-Jamaat men before the polls, Hasina said, "The BNP-Jamaat are terrorist parties and they always indulge in terrorism and corruption."

"Ten of our leaders and workers, including the AL president in Patnitala of Naogaon, were killed by the BNP-Jamaat cadres in the last couple of days," she said.

"We don't want any violence; we want that the people will cast their votes peacefully, which is their fundamental right... they will cast vote and make [any candidate] victorious as per their wish."

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A confident Sheikh Rehana with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Saima Wazed after they voted at Dhaka City College.

PHOTO: PID

## 'If they don't come, how will they be seen?'

### CEC says regarding absence of BNP agents at polling centres

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

In the face of allegations that agents of BNP were hardly visible in polling centres across the country, the chief election commissioner (CEC) has claimed that they were not seen because they did not show up in the first place.

CEC KM Nurul Huda made the remark while talking to journalists after casting his ballot at Uttara IES School and College yesterday around 11:00am.

"It is their choice. If they don't come, how will they be seen?" Huda said, adding that the election was held in a fair manner except for one or two isolated incidents.

The allegation came from two election commissioners – Mahbub Talukder and Rafiqul Islam – who cast votes at separate centres.

No agent of the opposition was seen at Ispahani Girls' School and College in the capital's Moghbazar area where he exercised his franchise around 9:00am, said Mahbub Talukder. He claimed to have received similar accounts from all across the country.

When asked if he found the election to be free and fair, he said, "You better ask your conscience. I don't want to talk about this."

Election Commissioner Rafiqul Islam said he did not see any polling agent of BNP at Lake Circus Girls High School in Kalabagan, where he voted around 9:00am.

He observed three centres including Gonobhaban Government High School in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar area. None of the centres had any agent of BNP, according to Rafiqul.

He further told journalists that he was disheartened because the election was tainted by incidents of violence.

The Daily Star correspondents visited around 250 polling centres in Dhaka and found 54 polling agents of BNP.

Meanwhile, Election Commission Secretary Helaluddin Ahmed said the election was held across the country amidst festivity and in a peaceful atmosphere with huge participation of voters. He said this in a briefing at the EC Secretariat after voting ended at 4:00pm.

He also assured of investigating all incidents of violence during election that saw deaths of at least 17 people.

"Legal action will be taken after investigating each of the incidents of violence," he said.



KM Nurul Huda

## Leftist parties reject polls, demand re-election

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Rejecting the 11th parliamentary election, several leftist political parties yesterday demanded a "re-election" under a "non-partisan caretaker government" as early as possible.

In separate statements and press briefings, they heavily came down on the countrywide "vote rigging" by the ruling party alliance led by Awami League (AL).

"It has been proved once again that there is no chance of a free, neutral [and] acceptable election under a partisan government. The result of this election will not be acceptable," said Mohammad Shah Alam, coordinator of Bam Ganatantrik Jote, a group of eight leftist parties including the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), and Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal (BSD).

"Bam Ganatantrik Jote is rejecting this forced and farcical election which has been staged through blocking the country [and] snatching the voting rights of voters," Alam said at a press conference in the group's Dhaka office.

Meanwhile, Comrade Khaliqzaman, general secretary of (BSD), in a separate statement, also demanded a "re-election" under a "non-partisan caretaker government".

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## Police-aided ballot stuffing Their first vote

### First-hand accounts of new voters

STAR REPORT

waiting for more than three hours at the college gate.

The correspondent entered the college at 3:15pm and found only a few voters inside with the polling booths empty.

Abul Hashem Md Farid, presiding officer of centre no. 85, said, "Voters' entry is controlled by police. What can I do?"

Noor-E-Azam, presiding officer of centre no. 86, echoed him.

Asked about it at 3:45pm, SI Sujan, who stood guard at the gate, said, "We will let

STAR REPORT

The ruling party supporters were seen stuffing ballot boxes from 1:45pm to 2:15pm at Gulshan Model School and College in Dhaka yesterday.

They did it at booth no. 1 on the first floor while law enforcers and election officials were present, witnessed a correspondent of The Daily Star.

After seeing this at 1:45pm, the correspondent left the scene and returned again at



A policeman stands guard at Faridabad High School in Shyampur where voting started after more than a 40-minute delay for reasons unknown. Moreover, few voters were seen there when the photo was taken around 9:45am yesterday.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

2:15pm. Al Amin, a sub-inspector who was blocking the entry, allowed him access without a camera. The police officer followed the reporter and signalled the youths stuffing the ballot boxes with a shout, "Go out...go out..."

Police on duty at Government Titumir College, which housed three centres, held back voters in long queues for hours saying the centres would be crowded otherwise.

They allowed only 10 voters at a time. The voters in the queues said they were

them in now."

However, many voters, tired and exhausted after hours of waiting, had already left. At this stage, the ruling party activists took control of the entrance to let their chosen people enter during the final minutes of voting.

At Block-D in Mirpur-12, our correspondent entered Al-Quran Academy around 10:00am and was immediately escorted by

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PHOTO: PALASH KHAN



The main gate of Shahidnagar Primary School in Keraniganj remained closed to voters for more than one hour because of a "lunch break".

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

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## Lunch break during voting!

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Lunch break at Lalbagh Number 2 Primary School would be a mundane affair had it not been a polling centre in Dhaka-7 constituency.

According to regulations, the Election Commission mandates uninterrupted voting across all centres from 8:00am to 4:00pm.

And the reason for this unprecedented lunch break? Free packets of biriyani doled out by AL candidate Haji Mohammad Selim. Even the boxes were custom-made with the candidate's face and election symbol "boat" on it. As polling officers munched on, fingers knuckle-deep in greasy biryani, voters queued up outside and shouted to be let in.

A similar scenario was in Rahamatullah High School of Lalbagh, where lunch break began around 1:30pm. "Our polling agents are having lunch, no one can enter," said men bearing "boat" ID cards to this correspondent. Only select one or two voters were being allowed in, while a mob formed outside.

Riaz Uddin was one voter who managed to slip inside. "I had been waiting for an hour. Every time a queue formed, the AL volunteers dispersed the line saying there is no voting going on here. I managed to get in behind someone after about an hour!"

Meanwhile, half an hour into the lunch break, voters could be heard banging on the gates to be let in.

Sabbir Biswas, presiding officer at Rahamatullah School, told The Daily Star that he has informed the police about the "lunch break".

When the gates were finally opened, all was quiet in front of the centre -- most of the frustrated voters had left.

KM Bashir Government Primary School of the same constituency was closed between 1:00pm and 2:00pm.

## Couldn't find serial number, couldn't vote

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

An unspecified number of voters had to give up their voting right and go back home in anger and frustration yesterday, as polling officials refused to help them find their voter serial number.

Touhida Tasnim, along with several other women, came with their national identity cards to centre-67 at Gulshan Model School and College but they did not know their serial numbers. They were seen frantically wandering and requesting whoever they came across to help them find the serial number. Finally, when they approached the presiding officer of the centre, Md Intajuddin, he turned down their request.

"I am sorry, I can't help you in this. The Election Commission has not given any instruction about helping in finding voter serial numbers," said Intajuddin, as The Daily Star correspondent, present at the scene, asked him how a voter could know about his or her serial number.

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