



An official looks at ballot papers for today's Dhaka North City Corporation by-election at Rajdhani High School on Manik Mia Avenue. Voting materials were taken to different polling centres throughout yesterday.

PHOTO:
PRABIR DAS

A rare lack of festivity

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free and fair election was not possible under the current Awami League government.

The mayoral post fell vacant following the death of Annisul Huq on November 30, 2017. He had been elected mayor on April 28, 2015.

Election to councillor posts in 36 new wards -- 18 under the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) and 18 under the Dhaka South City Corporation -- is also taking place today.

The voting starts at 8:00am and will continue till 4:00pm without any break.

Meanwhile, at a press briefing at the Nirbachon Bhaban yesterday, Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda said all preparations were over for holding the election in a free and fair manner.

He called upon all voters to cast their ballots for their candidates of choice without any fear. He also asked the candidates to follow the electoral code of conduct.

A total of five candidates are vying for the mayor post while 116 for the councillor positions.

Among the five mayor runners, ruling party candidate Atiqul Islam and Shafin Ahmed of Jatiya Party were seen campaigning. However, Anisur Rahman of the National People's Party, Shahin Khan of the Progressive Democratic Party and independent candidate Abdur Rahim were hardly seen during the electioneering, which officially began on February 11 and ended on February 26 midnight.

The total number of voters in the mayor by-polls is around 30.35 lakh and polling centres 1,286.

For the council election to the DNSCC, around 5.9 lakh people are expected to vote. Besides, 45 candidates are vying for six councillor posts reserved for women.

In the other city corporation, the number of voters in 18 wards is around 4.96. A total of 125 candidates are contesting for 18 councillor positions while 45 for six councillor positions reserved for women.

EC sources said 19 law enforcers would be deployed at each polling station while 23 for each "important" polling station. Besides, 72 executive magistrates will work in DNCC areas and 24 others in DSCC areas for today's election.

CEC Nurul Huda said BGB and Rab personnel would work as striking force on the voting day.

He asked all polling agents not to leave their respective polling centres until they got the result sheets.

Responding to a query over the opposition political parties not joining the polls, Huda said the commission did not have anything to do if anyone was not eager to participate in any polls.

"It's not a matter of having no confidence in the commission. But it is an irritating matter for us," he said.

VEHICULAR MOVEMENT

The CEC said all public transport could ply the main city thoroughfares today. But private vehicles would be able to run only during emergencies.

On February 19, Road Transport

and Highways Division had issued a circular, imposing restrictions on vehicular movement on the election day.

The restriction will be applicable to motor-run three-wheelers, autorickshaws, motorcycles, taxi cabs, minibuses, SUVs, pickups, cars, buses, trucks, easy bikes and locally made vehicles.

The circular, however, said highways and important roads and side alleys connecting highways to the DNCC area were exempted from the ban.

Also, the ban will be relaxed for the candidates, their agents, local and foreign election observers having approvals from the returning officers and ID cards.

Besides, ambulance, vehicles of polls officials, law enforcement agencies, fire service, electricity, gas and telecom service providers will remain out of the purview of the ban.

Restriction on movement of motorcycles came into force from midnight last night and would continue till Friday midnight.

'Crystal meth' lab busted for 1st time

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Department of Narcotics Control claimed to have busted a narcotics manufacturing laboratory and seized a consignment of two types of new drugs, including crystal methamphetamine, from the capital's Jhigatola area yesterday.

A team of DNC raided the basement of 62, Jigatola around 2:00am and discovered the laboratory, Khorshid Alam, assistant director of DNC, told The Daily Star.

This was the first time in Bangladesh the DNC team detected these types of narcotics -- crystal meth and MDMA, he said.

The DNC team arrested Rakib Uddin, 45, in Mohammadpur area and two of his associates -- Md Jakaria, 30, and Helal Hossain alias Saddam, 32, -- in Eskaton area on Tuesday evening with 160 pieces of yaba tablets and five grams of crystal meth.

Squeezing information from the arrestees, the DNC team conducted a

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What's at stake

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an airstrike on Pakistani territory early Tuesday that New Delhi called a pre-emptive strike against militant camps in Pakistan. India said its bombs killed a "very large number" of militants, while Pakistan said there were no casualties in an airstrike it described as being carried out "in haste."

WHY IS THIS TENSION SO DANGEROUS?

Both India and Pakistan are believed to possess more than 100 nuclear warheads each and have conducted atomic weapon tests. Both countries have test-fired nuclear-capable missiles. Pakistan also has refused to renounce a first-strike option with its atomic bombs should it feel outgunned in a conventional war. It takes less than four minutes for a missile fired from Pakistan to reach India. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists warns that "computer models have predicted that the physical impacts of a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan, or even a single strike on a large city, would be devastating and would reverberate throughout the world."

HOW DID THE DISPUTE OVER KASHMIR BEGIN?

When Britain granted independence to the region in 1947, it divided the Indian subcontinent into a predominantly Hindu India and mostly Muslim Pakistan. Some areas could decide their own fate. In Kashmir, the only Muslim majority area ruled by a Hindu monarch, its ruler decided against giving the population a choice. That started the first India-Pakistan war in 1947. The conflict ended in 1949 when a United Nations resolution established the Line of Control dividing Kashmir between the two nations and calling for a direct vote on which country should control it. That vote has never been held. Indian and Pakistan fought a second war over Kashmir in 1965.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE?

India and Pakistan fought a third war in 1971 over what was East Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh. In 1999 and 2000, after Pakistan's military sent a ground force into Indian-controlled Kashmir at Kargil, the two countries faced off and a worried world urged both to pull back from the brink of war, fearing it could escalate into a nuclear conflict. Even in times of relative peace the two nations readily engage in brinkmanship and aggressive rhetoric.

HOW DO THE MILITARIES OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN COMPARE?

India, home to 1.3 billion people, has a conventional army of about 1.4 million soldiers. Pakistan, with a population of over 200 million people, has about 650,000 troops. Both countries have spent billions over the years developing conventional arms. Last year, Pakistan spent about \$11 billion or about 3.6 percent of its gross domestic product on defense. India meanwhile allocated about \$58 billion, or 2.1 percent of its GDP on defense, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies. India's ballooning military spending has propelled it to the world's fifth-biggest defense spender, surpassing the United Kingdom, according to the IISS.

HOW IS PAKISTAN REACTING?

Pakistan, which has a history of military coups and strong-arm rule from those tied to its intelligence services, has largely reacted to this conflict through its civilian government. Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi took the lead to condemn the airstrike Tuesday, painting India as an aggressor who would suffer repercussions, without elaborating. Qureshi also accused Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi of playing with regional stability to get votes in upcoming national elections. Prime Minister Imran Khan has called for a joint meeting of Pakistan's upper and lower houses of parliament. Public criticism of India has been loud across Pakistani media, with sporadic protests against New Delhi breaking out across the country.

HOW IS INDIA REACTING?

Indian government officials called the airstrike Tuesday a counterterrorism operation based on credible intelligence that another attack against India was imminent. The tensions could be a boon for Modi, whose Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party aims to maintain power in the upcoming elections. The airstrike appears to have temporarily insulated the Modi government from criticism about it failing to create as many jobs as pledged in the 2014 elections. Opposition party leaders have responded with support for India's air force. Meanwhile, Modi earned points with the powerful Hindu nationalist social group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat said Tuesday: "Truth and non-violence are fine, but the world

Japan's sumos hit by whisker ban

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Superstitious sumo wrestlers often decline to shave their beards during tournaments as they believe it brings them luck, but the sumo association have decided they will no longer tolerate such slovenliness.

"Wrestlers must preserve their personal hygiene," JSA elder Oguruma told reporters after a board meeting.

"Officials and referees will be on the lookout. The sumo ring is sacred and it's

important spectators don't see anything unsightly."

Grand champion Kakuryu said: "It's an important point so we must absolutely adhere to it."

The ancient sport of sumo has been tarnished by a series of scandals in recent years -- from allegations of bout-fixing and the involvement of organised crime to drugs arrests and severe bullying, the most serious case resulting in the death of a teenage wrestler in

2007.

Grand champion, or yokozuna, Harumafuji was charged over a brutal assault on a rival wrestler while out drinking in 2017, ending his illustrious career.

Believed by historians to date back some 2,000 years, sumo was plunged into further controversy when women who rushed to the aid of a local mayor who had collapsed during a speech were repeatedly told to leave the ring, creating a flurry of embarrassing head-

lines.

The JSA was forced to make a groveling apology after being accused of deep-rooted sexism, but just days later a female mayor from the western city of Takarazuka was barred from delivering a speech inside the sandy ring.

To add insult to injury, the gaffe-prone JSA was slammed again for trying to prevent girls from participating in a children's sumo event, citing "safety concerns".

STORM Woman killed, 5 injured

STAR REPORT

A woman was killed and five others were injured as a storm lashed the Bangabandhu bridge area of Sirajganj yesterday.

Many regions of the country, including Dhaka, experienced hours of rain in the last two days.

The rain is likely to continue in Rangpur, Rajshahi, Dhaka, Mymensingh, Khulna and Sylhet divisions and at a few places in Barishal and Chattogram divisions today, the met office forecasts.

Sufia Khatun, 52, was collecting fallen leaves at an eco-park near the Bangabandhu bridge around 3:00pm when a tree fell on her due to sudden strong wind, said Sayed Shahid Alam, officer-in-charge of Bangabandhu Bridge West Police Station.

The woman of Sarotia village in Sirajganj Sadar upazila died at the scene. Three other women who were with her were hurt.

Around the same time, two motorcyclists were injured after they lost balance and fell on the Bangabandhu bridge.

The injured were admitted to different hospitals, the OC said.

Trees also fell on highways and were cleared by firefighters, he said.

In Narail's Kalia upazila, several thousand birds, including egret and other water birds, were killed at "Anurima Eco Park" as the hailstorm coupled with rain ripped through the country, reports UNB.

Erfan Ahmed, managing director of the eco-park, said several thousand birds were lying dead in the park after the storm.

Tension spirals

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Ghafoor said the jets had been shot down after Pakistani planes earlier flew across the Line of Control, the de facto border in Kashmir, to the Indian side in a show of strength, hitting non-military targets including supply depots.

Afterwards, he said, the two Indian planes crossed the LoC into Pakistani airspace and were shot down. One fell in to Pakistani-held Kashmir, while the second crashed on the other side, he said.

He denied initial reports that a Pakistan plane had been shot down, saying accounts an F-16 had been lost were incorrect as none was used in the action.

Later, Indian foreign ministry spokesman Rajeev Kumar said a Pakistani jet was hit as it took part in an operation "to target military installations on the Indian side".

Pakistan state media published a video purportedly showing the captured pilot being interrogated.

It shows a blindfolded man in an Indian Air Force uniform, his face bloodied, with his hands tied behind him, giving his name, rank and serial number as a soldier interrogates him.

The military later released a second video showing the man without a blindfold and drinking a cup of tea.

Separately, five people were killed when an IAF helicopter crashed in Budgam district of Jammu and Kashmir, Times of India reports.

Four of the victims are believed to be IAF personnel.

The chopper crashed in an open field near Garend Kalaan village around 10:05am.

The incidents are the latest in a dangerous sequence of events between the two



Pakistani Kashmiri residents evacuate from the border town of Chakothi in Pakistan administered Kashmir, some 3km from Line of Control yesterday. Thousands of Kashmiris have fled their homes amid the latest flare up of hostilities between India and Pakistan.

PHOTO:
AFP

countries, whose ties have been under intense strain since the February 14 suicide bombing in Indian Kashmir that killed 40 troops.

New Delhi had promised to act, and on Tuesday its warplanes flew into Pakistani airspace and struck what it said was a camp of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), the militant group that claimed the Kashmir bombing.

After the strike India said its warplanes struck a militant training camp inside Pakistan, killing "a very large number" of fighters, though Pakistan officials denied there had been any casualties.

It was India's first air strike on Pakistani soil since 1971 -- when neither had nuclear weapons.

Islamabad, while denying the Indian strike caused any major damage or casu-

alties, quickly vowed to retaliate, fuelling fears of a disastrous confrontation in South Asia.

Earlier yesterday, India's foreign minister sought to ease the situation by downplaying Tuesday's strike, repeating Indian claims that it had been a pre-emptive attack on JeM.

"India does not wish to see further escalation of this situation," Sushma

Swaraj said during a visit to China.

The US, along with China, Russia, Britain and the European Union, have called for cooler heads to prevail.

"We encourage India and Pakistan to ... avoid escalation at any cost," US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

China yesterday again urged the two sides to "exercise restraint" and seek dialogue. Britain said it was "deeply concerned" and working with partners including the UN Security Council to defuse tensions.

The confrontation represents the first major foreign policy crisis for Pakistan's leader, who is believed to be close to the powerful military and who came to power last year vowing to seek dialogue with New Delhi.

The conflict also comes at a critical time for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who faces a general election in a matter of months.

Modi's decision to order air strikes could benefit him politically, according to analysts and pollsters, but he was accused yesterday by opposition parties of capitalising on conflict.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi criticised the "blatant politicisation of the sacrifices made by our armed forces", in a joint statement by 21 opposition parties, the first time they have broken ranks with the government over the issue.

Pakistan has denied involvement in the Kashmir bombing on February 14.

While India has consistently accused its neighbour of supporting extremist groups, Pakistan has equally vehemently denied any role in attacks in India and its only Muslim-majority state, Kashmir.

The Himalayan region has been divided between India and Pakistan since independence in 1947. They have fought two of their three wars over the territory.