

# FOILED HIJACK BID PM terms Biman pilot, crew heroes

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday praised the courage and intelligence of the pilot, co-pilot and cabin crew of the Biman aircraft which was attempted to be hijacked on February 24.

She also termed them heroes and said they saved the lives of the passengers.

Hasina showered the pilot, the co-pilot and the five crew members with praise as they called on her at the Gono Bhaban yesterday evening, PM's Deputy Press Secretary Ashrafur Alam Khokon told The Daily Star.

"You've showed huge courage, intelligence and prudence," she said, addressing the pilots and the crew of the aircraft, reports BSS.

"You've successfully tackled the situation with infinite courage and that's why there was no casualties and damage to the aircraft," she added.

The Dubai-bound Boeing 737-800 made an emergency landing at the Chattogram airport at 5:41pm on Sunday after a man named Polash Ahmed allegedly attempted to hijack the plane.

He was killed later in an eight-minute operation by military paramilitaries.

Hasina said she monitored the

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## Gunfights

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Hobil Hossain, officer-in-charge of Shyamnagar Police Station, said the bodies were sent to Satkhira Sadar Hospital for autopsies.

Elsewhere, an alleged drug peddler was killed in a "gunfight" with members of Border Guard Bangladesh in Teknaf upazila of Cox's Bazar yesterday.

The deceased is Billal Hossain, 38, of Laxmipur's Abdullahpur.

Lt Col Asadud Zaman, captain of BGB battalion in Teknaf, claimed that the members of the paramilitary force raided sluice gate-3 area in Hoaikong union of Teknaf on information that a huge number of yaba pills were about to be smuggled.

As the BGB men reached the area, smugglers attacked them with sharp weapons and guns, forcing them to retaliate. Asadud claimed, adding that Billal sustained bullet injuries during the gunfight.

Later, doctors declared Billal dead when he was taken to Teknaf Health Complex.

BGB also claimed to have recovered some 7,000 yaba pills and two sharp weapons from the spot.

Prodip Kumar Das, officer-in-charge of Teknaf Police Station, said the body was sent to Cox's Sadar Hospital for autopsy.

The Daily Star, however, could not verify the law enforcers' and BGB's claim independently.

Our Cox's Bazar and Satkhira correspondents contributed to this report.

## Tigers

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mostly talked about ahead of the Test, and it was assumed that it would give great assistance to the pacers. However, as head curator Karl Johnson had mentioned in the lead-up, the pitch had something for both bowlers and batsmen. While the pacers did get some initial movement, the surface had a lot to offer to the batsmen.

Perhaps the way Bangladesh opener Tamim Iqbal batted on his way to authoring a 128-ball 126 spoke to how batsmen could be the ones to make hay on the green if they chose their shots wisely. There was a valuable example later on in how patiently the two Kiwi openers -- Jeet Raval and Tom Latham -- batted after Bangladesh were kept to a sub-par total and ended the day in the drivers' seat, on 86 without loss.

Be it Mominul Haque chasing a harmless delivery down the leg side and nicking it to wicketkeeper BJ Watling, or stand-in skipper Mahmudullah Riyad's reckless attempt to pull a short delivery and top-edging a catch at a time when Bangladesh required the captain more than ever, it was only the Tigers themselves to be blamed for letting the initial momentum slip out of their hands.

While there would be no question regarding the skill and talent of the likes of Liton Das, Soumya Sarkar or Mohammad Mithun, the way they gave their wickets away cheaply in an attempt to score runs was almost as if the batsmen were playing a limited-overs game and not a five-day Test that requires a lot more temperament.

With New Zealand on top, it will now be a tough ask for the Tigers to claw their way back, and at the very least would require a lot more character and maturity than displayed yesterday.

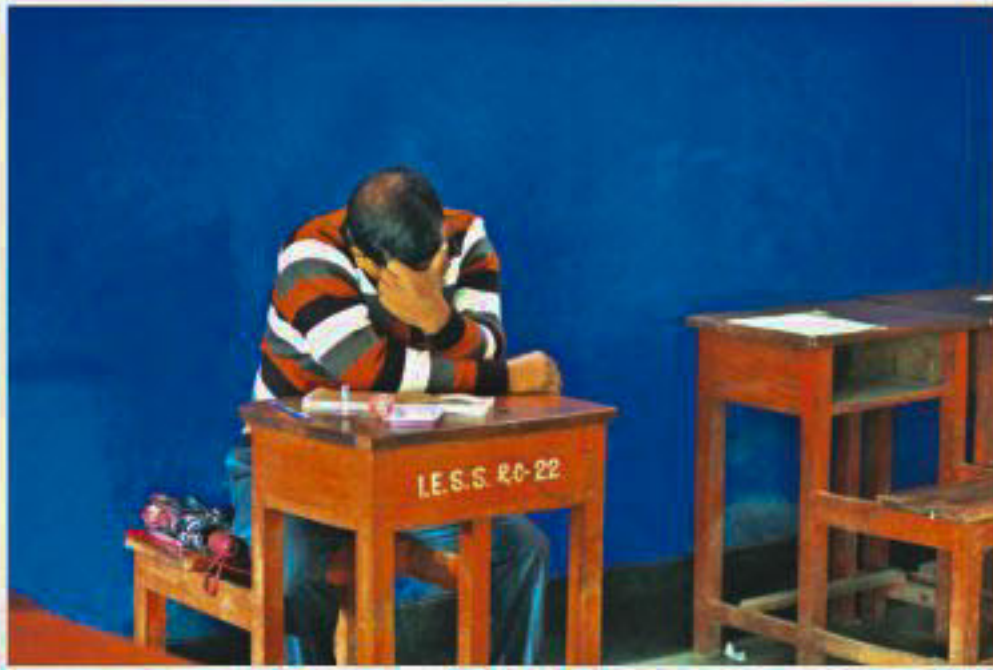


PHOTO: RASHED SHUJON/PALASH KHAN/PRADEEP DAS

**Banani's T&T Boys High School, a polling centre in yesterday's Dhaka North City Corporation mayoral by-polls, looks almost deserted during the voting around 10:00am. From bottom left, a polling official dozes off inside a centre at IES High School in Uttara around 11:30am, amid a poor presence of voters. Polling officials pass a lazy time at a centre at Government Physical Education College in Mohammadpur around 11:40am. A volunteer and a relative carry a female voter, in her 80s, to Matuail Ideal High School -- a polling centre of Dhaka South City Corporation councillor polls -- around the same time.**

## Empty yet not empty!

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the ruling Awami League candidate, speaking to a handful of journalists about something uninspiring while netizens occasionally stumbled on some posts in the social media to know that Safin Ahmed, the famous Miles singer and Jatiya Party nominee, was singing somewhere to be Dhaka's mayor. Their supporters too did not bring out processions or run door-to-door campaign so that voting atmosphere does not heat up.

People were fully free to exercise their franchise. So, why would not they come out on empty roads towards polling centres and elect mayor of their choice?

This time, nobody stood in anybody's way. A public holiday was declared in the capital, which includes nine parliamentary constituencies and a half, to facilitate exercising people's power of ballot. Then, why would not

voters show interest in exercising their power?

Yesterday's turnout slumped almost to a no-turnout from 37.30pc in 2015, when Annisul Huq was elected. People's enthusiasm at that time was very noticeable, with Annisul soon winning their hearts through some major initiatives for Dhaka-dwellers. Being one of the most populated and polluted cities in the world, Dhaka certainly needs a visionary and dynamic leader for the post that a charismatic Annisul had left vacant with his untimely demise. So, why Dhaka-dwellers couldn't care less about electing his successor?

The people's silence apparently beats the wits of Election Commission, the custodian of electoral system. As far as election expenditure goes, the EC has showed no compromise, doubling the budget to Tk 20 crore from last edition's. It is true that the character of

the constitutional institution came under serious scrutiny following the recent national elections. It's also true that the BNP, the other major political party after the AL, chose to boycott the polls following its shocking experience with the electoral system during the national elections. Smarting under a string of criticisms, the EC, however, continued to encourage people to vote.

That's possibly why Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda saw no EC responsibility in low or no turnout. Earlier in the day, he went on record saying: "Responsibility [for low turnout] goes to the candidates and political parties."

He, however, didn't blame the people, who are traditionally over-enthusiastic about politics and polls. But this time, what could turn them away? Were they threatened not to vote? No. Are they against having a mayor? No. Are they against their

voting rights? No. What's the meaning of their silence then?

All the voting centres The Daily Star visited were found almost empty. All the voting centres we've seen on television looked empty. The comment of the CEC was also in response to a very poor voter turnout.

Yet, when the voting ended, we came to know what we haven't seen. People seemed to have voted. Although they could not be seen, they turned up in astonishing numbers to vote lately. After the voting ended, the EC secretary primarily estimated that the turnout could be around 50 percent -- if that is the case, it would be a leap of 13pc from 2015 polls when Annisul was elected.

Possibly, people knew it all before. They're there even if not they're there. Of late, the EC seems to have created a make-believe democracy for us.

## Voters not interested

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However, the ruling Awami League men, as in the December 30 polls, were seen frequenting the polling centre areas. Some were even seen inside the booths.

In this almost voterless election, AL candidate Atiqul Islam is leading by a huge margin.

Of the 30.35 lakh voters, only 9.23 lakh people cast their votes, which is just about 31 percent, according to unofficial result sheet.

Voters turnout in the 2015 DNCC mayoral polls was 37.3 percent.

According to the unofficial count from all the 1,295 centres, Atiqul bagged 8,39,302 lakh votes while his Jatiya Party rival Shafin Ahmed, a prominent singer, got just 52,429 votes.

As many as 19,513 votes were cancelled, while all the three other mayoral candidates had their security money forfeited as they failed to get less than one-eighth of the total votes.

Given the experience in the national election, the main opposition party BNP and its allies boycotted the city polls.

But Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda defended the EC's role, like he did after the national election.

"We only create election environment. We cannot bring voters [to polling centres] from their homes," he told reporters in the morning.

According to him, voters were not interested in the election as the mayor would be in office just for one year.

However, soon after voting closed, Election Commission Secretary Helal Uddin Ahmed told reporters that they estimated 50 percent turnout in the mayoral by-polls and other elections in Dhaka north and Dhaka south city corporations.

The mayoral post fell vacant following the death of Annisul Huq in

November 2017, two years after his election in April 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 -- was also held yesterday.

Five candidates, including Atiqul and Shafin, vied for the mayor post while 116 for councillor positions.

The election came just two months into the national election, in which the ruling Awami League won a landslide.

The BNP and other opposition parties boycotted the polls results, citing massive vote rigging.

In a study, the Transparency International Bangladesh found electoral irregularities like stamping ballot papers the night before the December 30 polls and ballot stuffing by capturing booths on the election day in 47 out of the 50 constituencies surveyed.

Other irregularities include silence of law enforcers and administration officials, casting fake votes, barring voters from going to polling stations, forcing voters to cast vote for a specific symbol and preventing polling agents from going to centres, the study found.

### ELECTION SCENARIO

Ten correspondents and three photographers of The Daily Star visited 72 polling centres and found a strange picture.

At booth no-1 at Mohakhali Model High School polling station, a polling officer was found sleeping at 9:40am. The ballot box placed on a table in front of him was empty.

Around 20 policemen and Ansar members were gossiping, sitting on two benches.

One correspondent of this paper waited there for about 30 minutes, but saw no voters. In the meantime, the polling officers were having breakfast and tea inside the booths.

Presiding Officer Humayun Kabir could not say how many votes were cast in the first two hours. However, visiting the four booths, all the ballot boxes except one, were found empty.

"Vote cast may be low due to rain," he said.

TNT Adarsha Girls High School centre is some 500 metres away.

Seeing The Daily Star correspondent, the assistant presiding officer came out of a booth and said, "What's the point of visiting the booths, brother? Better take a seat."

"Brother, what are you going to write today? See? Just one vote has been cast in the first two and a half hours. We don't know how we will spend the whole day here," he said.

Two minutes later, around 30 youths and teenagers wearing boat symbols entered the centre, meant only for female voters. They went to the first floor of the building while two youths were guarding the staircase and did not allow anyone to go up.

Presiding Officer Mizanur Rahman could not give any figure of turnout in the first two and a half hours.

Eight other centres in Mohakhali, Banani, Gulshan and Uttara had similar pictures in terms of voters' presence.

At the two polling centres at Mohammadpur Government College, some people wearing badges of "boat" tried to bar two reporters of this paper from entering the centre.

However, they eventually managed to enter the station, where only 87 out of the 4,474 votes were cast till 10:50am.

In another polling centre at Mohammadpur Government College, not a single vote was cast till 10:30am.

It was a similar picture at the female polling centre at Mohammadpur Government Physical Education College. No vote

was cast here till 11:30am. Around 15 minutes later, only two voters showed up.

Gopal Chandra Saha, presiding officer of the centre, said only two votes out of total 2,227 were cast till 11:50am.

No voters were seen at the Darul Ulum Maius Sunnah polling centre at Polashnagar in Mirpur-11 at 3:30pm. Two supporters of the AL candidate wearing badges were casting votes after taking ballots from polling officials.

Presiding Officer Nazrul Islam declined to talk about this irregularity.

While taking photograph of an empty polling booth at Kalyanpur Girls High School polling centre, a middle-aged man flanked by some youths and a police member forced The Daily Star correspondents to delete the photos.

He identified himself as the presiding officer, and said, "Don't you know it is illegal to take photograph inside the polling centre?... Besides, it would not be fair if you show in your paper that the polling centre is empty."

Later, The Daily Star came to know that the man is actually Belal, organising secretary of ward no-12, Dhaka City North, Awami League.

At Sharulia under Dhaka South City Corporation, supporters of councillor candidates offered transport to voters, only to receive a lukewarm response.

Four candidates contested for the councillor post.

In front of the Kazi Ashrafuddin Primary School at Staff Quarter area, supporters of AL candidate for councillor post of ward 70 were seen asking voters to get on human hauliers to go to the polling centre.

One of supporters said the polling centre was far away. "That is why we're providing transport," he said and hurriedly walked away.

## Sign of thaw

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help to diffuse crisis between the arch-rivals.

Pakistan has said it downed two Indian fighters, while India confirmed it had lost one plane and claimed it had shot down a Pakistani jet.

"I am afraid of miscalculations," Khan said. "We should not even think of war, especially in view of the lethality of the weapons that we have." However he warned that his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi should not misconstrue his desire to de-escalate as "weakness".

"India must know that we will be forced to strongly retaliate against any Indian action in the future," he said.

Khan did not give details of when or where the pilot would be released.

In response, top Indian military chiefs said its forces will remain on a "heightened" state of alert despite Pakistan's promise to free the pilot.

Top generals from the Indian air force, army and navy also renewed claims that India had shot down a Pakistani F-16 jet in the air battles after an attack Wednesday on military installations in Indian-administered Kashmir.

"We are fully prepared and in a heightened state of readiness to respond to any provocation from Pakistan," said the army's Major General Surendra Singh Mahal at a press conference.

He said ground-based air defence weapons had been "put on high alert" along the de facto border with Pakistan in Kashmir, across which both sides had fired shells in recent days as the crisis escalated.

The top military officials also unveiled fragments from a missile they said matched the Pakistani F-16 fighter jet that crossed into Indian airspace and was shot down.

Pakistan has denied New Delhi's assertions that one of its fighters was downed.

India's Air Vice Marshall RKG Kapoor said Pakistan's decision to free the pilot, though welcome, simply followed international norms around prisoners of war.

Wednesday's dogfight and the pilot's capture sparked fears of India and Pakistan -- who have fought two wars and countless deadly skirmishes over the Himalayan region -- entering a cycle of retaliation and counterattacks that could spiral out of control.

Pakistan has closed its airspace indefinitely, stranding thousands of passengers worldwide; and the army said yesterday its troops were on high alert along the Line of Control.

Authorities have tightened security across the country, with hospitals on alert and leave for police and other security officials cancelled in some cities.

Analysts have said the pilot's fate, and his safe release, could prove central to the neighbours pulling back from the brink.

US analyst Michael Kugelman said it was a "big decision to part with a bargaining chip".

In India the announcement was being seen as a diplomatic victory for New Delhi, with commentators saying Islamabad had yielded under pressure.

The hashtag #WelcomeBackAbhi was swiftly trending.

US President Donald Trump voiced optimism earlier yesterday that the tensions could soon be resolved.

"We have had some reasonably decent news... Hopefully that's going to be coming to an end," he said of the crisis, speaking to reporters in Hanoi after a summit there with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Indian government sources said they were unsure what Trump was referring to.

The confrontation erupted after a suicide attack in Indian-held Kashmir killed 40 Indian troops on February 14.

New Delhi blamed the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad militant group for the attack. Twelve days later Indian warplanes launched a strike inside Pakistani territory, hitting what it said was a militant training camp.

An infuriated Islamabad denied major casualties or damage, but a day later launched its own incursion across the Line of Control which sparked the dogfight that ended in Abhinandan's capture.

Meanwhile, troops from India and Pakistan continued exchanging fire yesterday in the Poonch district since the morning, according to a statement from the Indian army.

Aijaz Ahmad, a resident in the Indian-controlled portion of the district, said he was still hearing heavy firing yesterday afternoon.

Pakistan said the firing began overnight.

"The firing continued in intervals throughout the night. It was moderate," said Shaukat Yusufzai, an administration official in the Pakistan-controlled part of Poonch.

India is building more than 14,000 bunkers for families in Jammu and Kashmir state living close to the border, hoping to keep them safe near their homes rather than evacuate them.

## Top 20 named

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Farmers Bank (now called Padma Bank) for regaining depositors' confidence.

The question-answer session was chaired by Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury.