# Mundane all day

## *Two centres observed by Star throughout the polling see turnout below expectation, thin presence of young voters*

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Low overall turnout and a lesser presence of young voters compared to that of the elderly was what The Daily Star observed at two voting centres during the city corporations polls yesterday.

A polling centre designated for female voters under the jurisdiction of the Dhaka North City Corporation saw as less as 7.18 percent turnout during voting hours.

Of the 1,686 female voters, only 121 exercised their voting rights at Centre-498 in Adarsha High School in Mirpur, which falls under ward-14 of DNCC.

As polling hours began at 8:00am, the first hour only saw three voters. The number of votes cast was 18 at 10:00am, 37 at 11:00am and 54 by noon.

In the next three hours, the number went up to 80, 92 and 100 respectively.

Voting continued till 4:00pm without break.

The Daily Star learnt this unofficial number of turnouts as the newspaper assigned two journalists to observe the atmosphere in the centre round the clock during polling hours.

Similarly, two other journalists were assigned to observe Centre-510 in Sir Salimullah Medical College in Lalbagh, which falls under ward-30 of the Dhaka South City Corporation.

This centre, for both male and female voters, saw a little over 33 percent turnout with 895 out of 2,708 votes cast.

Although votes were cast mostly peacefully without any major incident at the two centres, the overall atmosphere was mundane thanks to slim presence of voters.

There were no queues of voters at all at the centres and those who went to vote did not have to wait for long.

"We expected more voter presence," said Arifur Rahman, presiding officer at centre-510.

Arifur said the voting was held without any hassles except for one or two minor incidents.

Officials at the centre said finger prints of some five elderlies did not match and they had to find alternatives to ensure that their votes could be cast.

Jasmin Razzak, a voter at Adarsha High School Centre, said although she could cast her vote without hassles, she and one of her companions faced problems outside the centre.

She alleged that while coming to the centre, some youths wearing badges of a ruling party man's electoral symbol stopped them and checked their handbags, she alleged.

At Adarsha High School, The Daily Star journalists had planned to observe the atmosphere at Centre-491 (male) on the third floor of a five-storey school building, considering the fact that it was designated for the highest number of voters -- 2,681.

However, on-duty police officials barred them from staying at the corridor, let alone allowing them to enter the polling booths.

At Centre-498, the correspondents did not find any polling agents of the opposition BNP at the five booths.

There, both police personnel and the presiding officer did not allow the correspondents to enter the polling booths.

Officials there also said they found mismatched fingerprints of about five to six elderly women who had to cast their votes through alternative means.

Of the voters who turned up, the number of middle-aged and elderly women were noticeably higher than younger voters.

Of the mayoral aspirants, incumbent DNCC Mayor Atiqul Islam visited the centre around 11:15am.

Presiding Officer Nazir Ahmed said the voting was done peacefully and there was no major incident at the centre.

Voting centres of the councillor aspirants saw some incidents, as ward-14 saw two aspirants belonging to the ruling-party contested each other.

Heated words and slogans and counter-slogans were exchanged between small groups of supporters around 2:15pm.

On-duty law enforcers later dispersed them.

At Centre-510 of the DSCC, son of a ruling party lawmaker contested one of his close relatives as councillor aspirants.

There were about 22 polling agents at eight booths at the centre but none of them were from the opposition BNP, although some youths were seen overly enthusiastic in helping out voters towards the polling booths.

Some even entered the booths and escorted the voters near the secret area where votes were being cast.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

**UNOFFICIAL OFFICIAL ... The man in the dark suit, a supporter of DSCC mayoral candidate Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh, making a show of his unabashed breaches of conduct at the polling centre in Sir Salimullah Medical College. *Clockwise from top left*, he oversees voters being identified, looks inside the secret room to make sure the vote has been cast for the right contestant, proudly poses with a woman he had "helped" vote, and finally offers a bottle of fizzy drink to two American election observers -- staying inside the polling booth all the while.**

POLLING CENTRES AT DU

# BCL men follow 'occupy, control' instructions

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) leaders and activists seemed to have taken Awami League presidium member Abdur Rahman's instruction of "occupying and controlling" polling centres seriously, as members of the ruling party's student wing were seen in large numbers at seven centres inside Dhaka University (DU) campus.

The BCL men made fake queues in front of different centres to create the illusion of a high voter turnout, beat up a voter for casting vote for BNP's electoral symbol "sheaf of paddy", and allegedly forced BNP agents stationed at the polling centres out during the elections to Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) yesterday.

This correspondent visited seven polling centres including Curzon Hall, University Laboratory School, Qazi Motahar Hossain Bhaban, DU Gymnasium, Public Library, Udayan School and Buet from 8am to 3pm.

Among these, this correspondent was barred from entering polling rooms of six centres by law enforcers, and was allowed to enter only the polling rooms of the Public Library centre.

Police and Ansar personnel said no journalist can be let into the rooms without permission. Later, presiding officers of the centres came out of their rooms and spoke to the newspaper, but did not allow him in.

Around 10:15am, a 35-year-old man was heading out from the booth after casting his vote from Curzon Hall centre.

A group of Chhatra League activists of DU, enquired the man symbol he voted for, and beat him up as the latter answered that he voted for "sheaf of paddy".

The voter could not be contacted following the incident, as he ran to safety after he was beaten up by the youths, saw this correspondent.

The attackers had taken position near the centre in the morning, and were asking each person who they voted for as they were leaving the centre. One of the attackers was heard saying, "Beat him up. He is a BNP man."

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# UNWANTED HELP

## *Ruling party men in the name of assistance breach privacy in booths, even cast ballots on behalf of voters*

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Whether voters needed help or not, polling agents of the ruling party insisted on being by their sides at all times -- even inside the sacred area of the polling booth where nobody save the EVM machine is supposed to be a witness.

Help came in many ways. Sometimes the help was verbal, sometimes the help was so generous; the voters did not even have to cast their own votes.

The help was almost always unwelcome.

At Khan Hasan Adarsha High School in Kathalbagan, our correspondent watched voter Nargis Sultana enter the curtained-off area where the EVM machine was located, only to be followed by three others.

There was a scuffle, which could be understood through the thin fabric of the curtains, and Sultana started yelling, "How dare you give my vote? I want to give my vote! Let me vote!"

An agent in a black coat named Md Russel told her to get out of the booth. As she was pushed out of the booth, an extremely angry Sultana stormed out of the centre. "How could they do that? They took my fingerprints to unlock my vote, but pressed the buttons before I could!" she said.

When this correspondent went back to ask Md Russel and another agent, Lucky Begum, who were in the booth with her, what the scuffle was about, they told the correspondent to leave the room. "We were just helping her, that's all. We are sorry, it was a mistake," she said.

At New Junior Ideal School in Kathalbagan, a boat agent sprang up every time a voter slipped through the black curtains, and said, "Let me teach you how to use an EVM!"

This happened every time even though the polling officer and assistant presiding officer carefully instructed every voter how to use an EVM using a visual poster before sending them inside the booth.

When asked whether it is possible for the assistant presiding officer to help people inside the booth instead of the agents, the officer replied, "No, that is not possible because nobody is allowed inside the booth. But as you can see, they keep going in."

A similar scene was observed at Jamia Islamia Baitul Falah by our correspondent, who saw the boat agents targeting elderly voters.

At YWCA school, the presiding officer Nojibur Rahman caught a boat agent inside a booth with voters, shoved aside the curtains, and extracted the agent. All this happened in front of this correspondent, but when asked why an agent was with a voter, he said, "They are probably relatives."

Another voter who cast her vote at Kid's International School in Adabor ranted about how the agents pressed the buttons for her.

"They [AL polling officers] cast my vote after telling me they would show me how to do it," she alleged.

After choosing the first candidate, the EVM machine suddenly stopped working, she said.

Following that, AL polling officers unplugged the EVM machine. "They then hijacked the next two votes on the pretext of fixing the machine," she alleged.

When she asked them to cancel the vote they refused and asked her to leave, she claimed.

In another instance, a journalist of this newspaper accidentally pressed on a wrong icon and asked the polling officer if she could do it over. "An agent came in, and pressed the buttons for boat on the EVMs for the two councillors and said there, your mistake has been fixed," said the journalist.

Even a voter who said he votes for Awami League consistently was vexed at the intrusion of privacy.

"I had pressed on the button for the mayor, but had not hit confirm yet, when I noticed that an agent was inside and looking over my shoulder," said the male voter who cast his ballot at YWCA school.

"I told him to leave, but he would not, until I pressed confirm."

Our correspondent interviewed a voter of Ideal School and College who said, "When I was about to vote in the booth, a local leader came out of nowhere in my chamber to see what I vote for. I requested him to go outside but he wanted to see what button I pressed on the EVM.

"He then shouted saying that no one can vote at the booth without showing him what symbol they are choosing to vote."

The correspondent also found voters with similar allegations at Kalachandpur Government School and College.

Meanwhile, readers of The Daily Star sent in similar experiences of receiving unwanted help.

This is what a voter, requesting anonymity, said about voting in Teacher's Training College:

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**Awami League mayor candidates Atiqul Islam, *left*, and Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh greet Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with bouquets at the Gono Bhaban yesterday evening.** PHOTO: BSS

# 'Agents must be strong'

## *CEC skirts responsibility on party representatives being driven out of centres*

STAR REPORT

Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda yesterday said polling agents should have the strength to stay put at polling centres.

"The agents must have strength to persist… They shouldn't leave whenever anyone asks," the CEC said after a reporter drew his attention to allegations that polling agents of BNP-nominated mayor candidates were being driven out of centres.

Nurul Huda made the comment while briefing reporters after casting his vote around 11:30am at IES school and College in Uttara.

"We did not receive any direct complaints that agents are being driven out," he said.

Asked whether polling agents should resist if they face difficulties, the CEC said, "They should. I think so…Primarily they should resist

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