

Voters keep off

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votes, show unofficial results from 1,075 of the 1,150 polling stations in Dhaka south.

In the DNCC, AL candidate Atiqul Islam secured 235,354 votes while BNP's Tabith Awal got 146,355, according to unofficial results from 739 out of the 1,318 centres in Dhaka north.

Meanwhile, the BNP rejected the results and called a daylong hartal today in the capital.

"We are totally rejecting the city elections. A dawn-to-dusk hartal will be observed in the city on Sunday," BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhruul Islam Alamgir said at a press conference at the party's Nayapaltan central office last night.

Earlier, the party submitted a written complaint to the Election Commission over "irregularities" centring the city elections.

The poor turnout in Dhaka North and South city corporations polls speaks volumes of apathy that has developed among voters regarding the electoral process.

Reports from our correspondents indicate that voters' presence was thin at most of the polling centres where over

54 lakh voters were supposed to elect the city's custodians.

And this, according to experts, indicated people's diminishing confidence in the country's electoral system.

Many people were deprived of their voting rights in some of the previous elections, they said. Also, the Election Commission failed to create enthusiasm among the voters to go to polling centres.

"It is probably the outcome of the previous elections. Voters did not have confidence that they would be able to cast their votes without any fear, and their vote will make a difference," Prof Nizamuddin Ahmed, an expert on local governance system, told The Daily Star.

Given the intensity of the candidates' campaigns, the voter turnout should have been higher, he said. "But the poor presence of voters indicates that the Election Commission could not earn trust of the voters."

Echoing this view, Brig Gen (retd) Shakhawat Hossain, a former election commissioner, said people are losing trust in the electoral system because of the EC's poor management.

"The election was apparently peaceful with an abnormal voter turnout," he told this newspaper.

Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda predicted that the turnout would be less than 30 percent.

"It was a good election," he told the reporters last night.

In the previous 2015 elections, the average voter turnout in the two city corporations was 43.92 percent -- 37.29 percent in north and 48.4 percent in south.

Yesterday's polling was quite peaceful. But the city residents found some uncanny resemblance between this election and the 11th parliamentary polls. As in the December 30 national polls, there was a one-sided overwhelming show of strength this time too.

Both the BNP mayor aspirants as well as some BNP-backed councillor candidates alleged that the ruling party men drove out their polling agents from the polling centres. In an election, polling agents play a vital role in checking fake voting.

About the allegation, the CEC said, "The [polling] agents must have the strength to stay put... They shouldn't leave [the centres] if anyone asks them to do so."

There was a lot of speculations centring yesterday's election as it was the first EVM-only polls.

The EC used the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) at all

2,468 polling stations despite reservations from opposition political parties and concern among many voters about how to use the machines.

Many voters complained that they were unable to cast their ballots due to mismatch of fingerprints. But what made them uncomfortable was that the privacy of many voters was compromised during the casting of votes.

Besides, they alleged that inside the polling booths there were many "helping hands" who cast votes through EVMs on their behalf.

On the issue, Shakhawat said he heard that there were cases where voting through EVMs was manipulated by the people behind the machines.

"Even EVMs could not stop vote manipulation," he said.

The first election to the undivided Dhaka City Corporation was held in 1994 and the second one in 2002. The government in 2011 split the DCC into two but there was no election.

The two city corporations went to polls in 2015. The AL-backed candidates won the mayoral posts with the BNP-backed candidates boycotting the election halfway over allegations of vote rigging.

Biggest loser

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inviting for voters to come out from their homes on a day, declared a public holiday to cast votes amid festivity.

Largely peaceful was the climate around all polling centres. Still, the polls ambience, as seen by our 48 correspondents at 120 of 2,468 centres, was eerily quizzical. It was emptiness everywhere. Empty road, empty voting centre, empty polling booth, empty presence of opposition parties and empty look in the faces of polling officials. As if the word empty personified the city elections.

The turnout less than 30 percent only reflected how lowly the EC had actually fared in the trust scale of majority of voters who chose to forgo their right to elect.

Historically, Bangladeshis were most enthusiastic about their voting rights. Where did the enthusiasm go or how voters of today developed this mass apathy towards their once-cherished rights could be a grim soul-searching for our political system. But this symptom they certainly did not develop overnight. Ghosts in our electoral process have contributed to voters' gradual loss of interest.

However, irrespective of who won or lost in the city polls, the single biggest loser is the EC for sure. A strong 'no vote' was cast against the EC and election process, with majority of voters not turning up at polling centres. The erosion in voters' confidence started a long ago, with the EC appearing more and more compromising with the powers that be while holding elections in the past.

Apart from the overt bias of allowing the ruling party to violate the election code of conduct, the EC remained nonchalant to common concerns of parties out of power and experts about the prospect of getting EVMs malfunctioned and mishandled. Their strongest concern was: 'if machine is made by men, it can be hacked by men as well'.

The EC neither came forward to dispel their fear nor give parties the confidence about men around the machine during the polls. It maintained the same stance while moving on to conduct the city elections.

Coming out of polling centres yesterday, almost all voters complained to our correspondents about the presence of too many 'helping hands' around the machine.

Who were they? Helping hands for voters or ghosts that actually ran the machine? An independent investigation may clear the air around machine. But what's more urgent now for the EC is to clear its name and win back voter's confidence in elections.

Woman held after breaching Trump resort security

AFP, Miami

A woman attempting to flee from Florida police on Friday burst through two security checkpoints on a road leading to US President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort, officials said.

Secret service officers fired shots as the black SUV breached the checkpoints, hitting the car several times but causing no injuries.

The driver did not stop and sped by the club's driveway entrance, chased by the Florida Highway Patrol. Officers caught up with the car at a nearby motel, where the driver was arrested. Another woman in the car was not detained, and police said they believed she may have been picked up after the incident, CNN reported.

The president was not at the property at the time but is due to arrive later Friday, officials said. Police said they doubted the woman knew that she was even driving towards the president's residence.

She had fled earlier when a police officer approached her vehicle after she was reported to have been acting erratically on top of her car in Palm Beach, a wealthy beach town.

Not smooth sailing at all

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votes instead, and no privacy in the ballot booth. The Daily Star got many of these complaints from over 100 centres its reporters visited.

Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda himself faced trouble while trying to vote.

His fingerprint did not match the one in the database when he tried to cast his vote at a polling station in Uttara yesterday morning. He eventually voted using his national ID card number.

The CEC was lucky to have been able to cast his vote. The Daily Star got many complaints from voters who were unable to cast their votes due to finger-print mismatch. The list includes this paper's executive editor.

"I could not cast my vote. Someone cast it for me," a voter told this correspondent in front of Gandaria High School polling centre in Old Dhaka around 11:30am.

This correspondent, also a voter at that centre, then went into the polling centre, which is part of Dhaka-6 constituency where EVMs had been used in the 2018 national polls.

When this correspondent reached the polling booth on the third floor, he saw five people standing in line to cast their votes.

As a voter approached the booth, an unwanted "helper" sporting a card around his neck with the symbol of boat and Dhaka South AL candidates' pictures, entered the booth before him.

The voter and the "helper" were seen and heard exchanging heated words.

"What's the point of this kind of farce? I should not have come to vote," the voter was heard saying as he left.

Apparently disheartened by seeing a fellow voter's vote being cast by the unwanted "helper", some of the voters who were in the queue started leaving without casting their votes.

Asked, one of them said, "I will not allow someone to cast my vote against my will. It is better not to vote."

A first-time EVM voter shared his experience to this correspondent.

"I told him [unwanted "helper" in the booth], 'Let me cast my vote', " the voter said.

"Of course, I'm here to help you choose the ones to vote for," the voter quoted the man as saying.

After completing his biometric clearance, a voter in his 40s engaged in a heated exchange with the "helper" and at one stage told officials that he won't cast his and left fuming.

No sooner the voter had left, the "helper" went inside the booth and cast votes on the voter's behalf.

Ahead of a five-person queue was an elderly philanthropist of the locality. Following 10 minutes of trial and error, he got biometric clearance to vote.

But when he was casting his vote, the unwanted "helper" was keeping a close eye over the barely shoulder-height black curtain at the booth.

When this reporter went to cast his vote, a leader of the ruling party's youth front shouted from a distance. "He is a big brother of our locality. Let him cast his vote."

At Kids International School in PC Culture Housing, Adabor, a female voter complained that a polling officer cast her vote pretending to fix a broken machine.

"After I selected the first candidate, the machine stopped working. The polling officer then entered the booth and said 'let me help you and cast the votes'," said the voter, adding that the officer stole the next two votes on the ballot pretending to fix the machine.

The privacy required for casting votes seemed to be scarce.

Most of the voters said they felt embarrassed.

When a voter cast his or her vote, it remains on the screen for quite a while allowing people in the station to sneak a peek.

Around noon at Ideal School and College of Rampura, a heated exchange ensued after a female voter protested AL supporters' illegal interference. The woman told The Daily Star that the AL supporters were peeking into the booth to see who she was voting for.

Some aggrieved women also made similar complaints at New Model Degree College polling centre.

They said the ruling party men wanted to see who they were voting

Africa mobilises against coronavirus as fears mount

AFP, Dakar

African countries are scrambling to avert an outbreak of the rapidly spreading coronavirus strain, as health officials warn that the poorest countries are ill-equipped to combat the deadly disease.

Across the continent, governments have stationed nurses at airports to check for feverish passengers and have suspended Chinese entry visas, while ordinary people grow increasingly nervous.

There have been no verified infections in Africa to date, but deep trade links with China and often overstretched healthcare systems are raising concerns about the capacity to respond to an outbreak.

The World Health Organization (WHO) on Thursday declared a global emergency as coronavirus infections spread, after initially downplaying the threat.

"Our greatest concern is the potential for the virus to spread to countries with weaker health systems," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

J. Stephen Morrison, director of the Global Health Policy Center at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, said the disease risked taking root if it reaches certain African countries.

He warned that such a scenario could usher in a "global pandemic".

Several poor African states have recently suffered disastrous viral outbreaks -- and they're keenly aware of the threat.

The Ebola virus raged through Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea in 2014-2016, killing about 11,300 people.

Mosoka Fallah, the head of Liberia's public health institute, told lawmakers this week that the rapid spread of the new coronavirus was "catastrophic".

"Steps must be taken as early as possible to prevent it from entering here," he said, adding that the government had ramped up airport checks.

Anciao Fabio Paulo, an Angolan student, told AFP that "it's over" if coronavirus reaches his country.

"Our health system is vulnerable and there are no good specialists. With malaria, people are already dropping like flies," he said.

Coronavirus has killed more than 200 people in China -- where it emerged in the central city of Wuhan -- and infected thousands more.

At Senegal's Blaise Diagne International Airport, health officials peer into a small thermal camera before the passport check.

"The first sign of these communicable diseases is a fever," said Barnabe Gning, in charge of sanitary control in the West African country's airports.

The doctor, who previously helped prevent Ebola from reaching Senegal, said the airport installed the safety system late last week.

It was only able to do so quickly because, by chance, it had held disease-outbreak training in November.

However, Gning cautioned that thermal cameras are not foolproof.

Similar thermal cameras which detect feverish passengers are now going up across African capitals.

These allow people with a high temperature to be identified -- the camera screen shows their body heat -- and then quarantined pending a lab test confirming a coronavirus infection.

US author Mary Higgins Clark dies

AFP, Washington

Best-selling American author Mary Higgins Clark, known by her fans as the "Queen of Suspense", has died aged 92, her publisher confirmed Friday.

She was still producing a book a year at the age of 90, with her page-turners earning her a legion of fans across the world -- and even making her one of the top-selling fiction authors in France.

Clark's publisher Simon & Schuster announced her death, tweeting she died peacefully "surrounded by family and friends".

With sales of more than 100 million in the United States alone, she achieved success in her 40s after a series of personal tragedies.

Her father died from a heart attack when she was 11 years old and, with her mother struggling with three children, Clark was obliged to work

from 15.

After working as a stewardess for a year, she left to marry Warren Clark and raise a family, before he died suddenly when she was just 35.

To support her family, Clark touted her short stories, receiving 40 rejection letters before eventually achieving success.

Her first suspense novel in 1975, "Where Are the Children?", is now in its 75th printing.

Unwanted help

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"Midway through voting, a man with a 'Boat' symbol ID peeked into my voting booth. I asked what he was doing there and he said, 'No, I'm making sure that you are voting right!'"

At this point, the voter asked him to leave, but the man had noticed that he had not voted for 'boat'.

"He looked at me sternly and said, 'Oh, so you voted for that symbol? Get out of here.' He then exited the curtained area. I followed him out and saw him pointing at me and screaming at others present, 'Didn't you see this (profanity) cast her vote for that symbol? Who let her in?' Make sure this symbol gets no vote in this station!" described the voter.

"I asked why he was screaming profanities but he refused to engage with me, and instead coerced the officers to give my four-digit number and then walked inside the curtained area. When I questioned this and asked everyone there why he went in there with my number, they just told me to leave," described the voter. The voter tried finding the presiding officer, but failed, and alleged that the guards too did nothing.

দিলকুশায় অফিস স্পেস ভাড়া হবে

রাজ ভবন, ২৯ দিলকুশা বা/এ, ঢাকা-১০০০

* ভিন্ন দিক থেকে প্রাইম লোকেশনে আধুনিক ভিডিওর অফিস ভবন। * ৪র্থ তলা থেকে ৯ম তলা প্রতি দিকের স্পেস ৭,০০০ বর্গফুট। * নতুন লাইনে সার্বক্ষণিক পর্যাপ্ত পানি। * ১০০০ কেভিএ নতুন সার-স্টেমের মাধ্যমে নিরাপদ ও পর্যাপ্ত বিদ্যুৎ। * পূর্ণ লোড বন্যোপা নতুন ৫৫০ কেভিএ সার্বক্ষণিক জেনারেটর। * ভবনের দু'পাশে সার্বক্ষণিক ২টি নতুন লিফ্ট। * স্ট্রোয়া EXHUST SYSTEM সহ আধুনিক উল্লেখ্য সুবিধা। * ব্যাকে, বীমা ও আর্থিক প্রতিষ্ঠান ভাড়াটায় হিসাবে স্বাগত।

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3 journos beaten up

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professional duties.

A handful of journalists alleged that police and the presiding officers did not cooperate them and even drove them out of the centres in some cases.

Mostafizur Rahman Sumon, a crime reporter at online news portal Agami News, was attacked while taking photos of a gathering of Awami League activists in Ayerbazar area in the morning.

Followers of AL-backed councillor candidate Md Hossain Khokon snatched his phone and swooped on him wielding sharp weapons, his colleagues said.

Sumon was taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where he had to have six stitches on his head, said Inspector Bachchu Mia, in-charge of DMCH Police Outpost.

Lying on a hospital bed, Sumon told reporters that he was attacked when he tried to capture a procession where some youths were carrying firearms and sharp weapons on Sadeque Khan Road around 11:00am.

"They pushed me down on the road and beat me up as if I was a dog," he added.

While visiting Banani Bidyaniketan School and College centre in the afternoon, Inspector General of Police Mohammad Javed Patwary instructed police to take necessary actions

against the attackers.

A correspondent of Press Bangla Agency was also beaten up by Awami League activists while he was filming irregularities at Nikunja Jan-e-Alam School around 10:30am, Ibrahim Sarker, a special correspondent of the agency, told The Daily Star.

He was later taken to a Kurmitola General Hospital, Ibrahim.

Followers of AL-backed councillor candidate of ward no. 4 Md Jahangir Hossain attacked Chief Photographer of Bangla daily Kaler Kantha Sheikh Hasan at Madartek School, said SM Azad, chief crime reporter at the newspaper.

The attackers also took away the memory card of his camera, he said.

Meanwhile, AL supporters snatched the mobile phone of Foisal Ahmed, a reporter at The Daily Star, as he was taking a video when AL supporters were forcing voters to vote for boat at Ideal School and College in Rampura.

Meanwhile, two journalists were assaulted at Faridabad madrasah polling centre in old Dhaka allegedly by activists of Bangladesh Chhatra League.

The journos are Mahabub Montaji, staff reporter at Bangladesh Pratidin and Nurul Amin, staff reporter at The Daily Businesses Standard.

Nurul told The Daily Star that the attackers snatched their mobile phones and deleted some import

BCL men follow

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Earlier in the morning, a mobile court led by an executive magistrate removed at least 60 men who made fake lines in front of the Curzon Hall centres. However, they returned soon after the magistrate left.

At around 9am, eight agents of BNP were threatened and asked to leave polling stations at Curzon Hall and Udayan School, alleged convener of DU white panel teachers, Prof ABM Obaidul Islam.

"The situation of other four centres I have visited so far are the same," he said around 10am.

Later, the pro-BNP teachers submitted a written complaint to the presiding officer of University Laboratory School centre, said Prof Obaidul. He alleged that BNP agents were not allowed at any of the centres.

Agents of Islami Andolan Bangladesh and AL were seen present at the centre since morning.

Meanwhile, voter turnout was sparse till 10am. However, the turnout saw a little rise as the day progressed.

Abdul Motaleb, presiding officer of University Laboratory School told The Daily Star that only three votes were cast at his centre till 9:40am, over an hour and a half after voting began.

Some 80 out of 2,354 votes were cast at the Buet polling centre till 12 noon, said Presiding Officer Bashudeb. This reporter, however, found the premises of the centre empty at the time.

Only 61 votes were cast out of 1,879 at Motaher Hossain building, 57 out of 2,271 at Curzon Hall, and 128 out of 2,400 at DU Gymnasium centres till 10:15 am, according to respective presiding officers.

Udayan School presiding officer said he did not see BNP agents at the polling stations, and was trying to hold the elections smoothly. Presiding officers in other centres echoed him.

Contacted about the allegations, BCL central unit president Al Nahean Khan Joy said he did not hear anything about forming of fake queues or assaulting a voter, adding that he would look into it.