

BANGLADESH UPDATE



702
New cases in 24hrs



5,29,031
Total cases



7,942
Deaths



4,73,855
Recoveries



2,057,977
Deaths



96,337,208
Total cases

UPCOMING CCC POLLS

AL publishes ad with names of its candidates

Insiders say it exposes party's desperation to deter rebels

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

Failing to make rebel candidates step down from the Chattogram City Corporation elections despite repeated attempts, the port city Awami League has published an advertisement with the names of its nominated candidates.

Senior AL leaders told this newspaper that the advertisement was published to clear confusion among the voters.

Mentioning the names of those nominated by the party to contest the election for 41 ward councillors and 14 reserved seats for the women ward councillors, the advertisement was taken out on the first page of Daily Azadi, a local newspaper, on January 18.

On behalf of the CCC Election Operation Committee-2021, AL presidium member Engineer Mosharrif Hossain and Chattogram metropolitan AL General Secretary AJM Nasir Uddin jointly published the ad.

Mosharrif is the chief coordinator and also the chairman of the committee while AJM Nasir is the member-secretary.

Anxious of the prospect of losing the mayoral race due to divisions among the party ranks, the AL high command is working in unison for the party-supported candidates in the local body polls, party sources said.

However, insiders and grassroots leaders said the advertisement only exposes the severity of the intra-party feud.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Mosharrif Hossain said, "We've published the advertisement to clear the confusion several councillor candidates have created among the voters."

"If they [the rebel candidates] obey the party and its high command, then they should quit the electoral race. The party has given its order in this regard. Why have they violated it? If they really adhere to the party's ideology, they must refrain from the election," said the veteran politician and also a former minister.

He said, "Those who said we did not evaluate them are absolutely wrong. During the nomination processes, they [rebels] signed a paper and submitted it to the party office, saying they will accept the party decision -- no matter what it is."

The ad mentioned, "In the CCC election, scheduled to be held on 27 January, cast your vote in favour of [candidates who are] AL nominated and also for Ctg metropolitan unit's

Joint General Secretary freedom fighter M Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, with the 'boat' symbol, to continue the ongoing development of Chattogram. With that, try [your] best to win the 41 ward councillors and the 14 reserved seats for women ward councillors to continue your area-based progress. We have no other party-backed candidates apart from those."

Asked whether the advertisement can ease the ongoing intra-party tension, Mosharrif said, "We are trying to resolve the issue. It's unjust of them to disobey party commands. Those who will contest the polls without party tickets will no longer be with the party."

Sources said former councillors of 13 wards failed to get party nominations for the election. Of them, 12 are contesting the election independently. Only in ward-13, former ward commissioner Mohammed Hossen Hiran withdrew his candidacy.

A field-level intelligence report by the police recently also revealed that AL rebel candidates are trying to get support from BNP-Jamaat to win the electoral race.

In the report, it was also apprehended that a violent clash might take place among rebel candidates before the polls as well as on election day.

This newspaper has a copy of the report, which details the current political unrest between two blocks of Chattogram AL.

The report stated that the 12 rebel candidates for ward councillor are followers of Chattogram city AL's General Secretary AJM Nasir Uddin, adding that the immediate-past mayor of CCC AJM Nasir has been doing his best to make his followers win -- going against mayoral candidate Rezaul.

The report also said that AL-nominated candidates and rebel candidates will be desperate to collect votes for themselves on polling day, leaving AL mayoral candidate Rezaul Karim Chowdhury alone in the election battle.

Admitting that the party is facing problems due to rebels in the elections, AL Joint General Secretary Mahbulul Alam Hanif earlier told The Daily Star that the party's vote bank and voters are divided in elections due to this.

Around 200 candidates will contest under 41 general wards and 14 reserved wards. The lone candidate of East Bakalia ward-14 has already won the election uncontested.



Two bulls fight at a field crowded with spectators in Sylhet's Bolaura area yesterday. Owners of bulls from different districts in Sylhet division bring their animals to the daylong sporting event, organised by locals every year. Animal rights activists say such a cruel sporting event should not be held as it supports the act of cruelty to animals.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASTIR

Digital divide wreaks damage

FROM PAGE 1

Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) Director General Prof Syed Md Golam Faruk said the report had already been shared with government officials.

"The study was done during December, when secondary school students were solely focused on receiving and submitting assignments. So, the students' participation in distance learning was low [at that time]," he argued.

On March 17, the government closed all schools to contain the spread of coronavirus. The closure has recently been extended till January 30. The authorities have yet to decide when to reopen the educational institutions. The long closure has led to the cancellation of exams and left academic calendars in disarray.

After the school closure, the government started TV education through Sangsad TV for secondary and primary students. The school authorities are working to continue imparting lessons online.

Most students in urban areas have access to learning through the internet, but the digital divide has so far proved to be a great disadvantage for the underprivileged learners as they face the prospect of dropping out, mainly for the lack of devices and poor access to the internet.

While presenting the report yesterday, Mostafizur said students participating in distance learning spend, on an average, 50 minutes a day for receiving education.

Talking to this newspaper, teachers, however, said a student usually attends five to six online classes a day on average, meaning the daily learning time for them is around four hours.

DEMAND FOR REOPENING
The study report said 75 percent of students surveyed want to be back in the classroom soon and 76 percent parents, 73 percent district-level education officials and 80 percent education-related NGO officials are in favour of

school reopening. Fifty-eight percent of teachers favour reopening of schools following a more cautious approach.

The report said 82 percent teachers emphasised on the use of masks, sanitiser and the maintenance of social distancing for the reopening.

Fifty-three percent primary teachers and 48 percent secondary school teachers opined that the educational institutions must be cleaned and made safe before those are opened again.

About half of the teachers surveyed spoke in favour of changing sitting arrangements in classrooms so that physical distancing can be maintained.

Mostafizur Rahman told The Daily Star that many parents were calling for reopening the schools, saying that their children were becoming restless due to almost no contact with their teachers and friends for such a long period.

"Many parents say all activities are being done in the usual way and ask us why will children have to stay home like this?" he said.

Convenor of the Education Watch Report 2020-21 Mushtaq Chowdhury said the schools should be reopened in phases.

"We should consider starting usual classes only where Covid-19 infection and date rates were less. We should then analyse the situation and go for the reopening in other places," he said.

The study also showed that 62 percent of teachers said the syllabus should be shortened to recover the academic losses caused by the pandemic. On the other hand, 45 percent of students proposed completion of lessons that were not taught due to the closure.

Twenty-five percent teachers and the same percentage of guardians feared that the school drop-out rate might go up due to the closure.

DSHE DG Golam Faruk, however, said he did not think the rate would increase significantly. "But we are aware about the matter."

He also said any decision on reopening schools would come from the high-ups of the government. "We're assessing how much academic loss has been incurred due to the closure, we will take necessary steps to recover it," he added.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended that schools should be reopened in line with the directives of the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19.

Schools in rural areas where Covid-19 situation has not worsened should be reopened in February and schools in Dhaka, Chattogram, Khulna, Rajshahi and divisional cities could be reopened in phases in March.

The reopening should be done in phases, with classes of grades IV, V, X and XII initially and those of other grades later, the study suggested.

There should be steps to ensure that students and teachers wear masks, and they have clean toilets, classroom benches and arrangements for washing hands.

The study also recommended cutting down time for examinations and giving more time on imparting education. It recommended taking no Primary Education Completion Examination and Junior School Certificate tests, and shortening SSC and HSC syllabuses with fewer subjects.

Calling for cutting down vacation period in future, the study suggested vaccinating all teachers and other teaching staffers immediately.

"The government should make a decision on reopening schools soon. Parents, students and general people are in favour of school reopening. Whatever the decision is, it should be announced soon so that students and teachers can make necessary preparations," CAMPE Executive Director Rasheda K Choudhury said.

She also said funds would be required to ensure safety and hygiene of students and teachers, and that funds must be ensured on a priority basis.

Court dismisses defamation case against ex-DSCC mayor Khokon

Another case withdrawn

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday dismissed a defamation case filed against former Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) mayor Sayeed Khokon over making "defamatory comments" on incumbent Mayor Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh.

Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Baki Billah passed the order as he did not find sufficient grounds to accept the case lodged by one Kazi Anisur Rahman, court sources said.

The same magistrate also granted a petition for withdrawing another defamation case filed against Khokon yesterday after lawyer Sarwar Alam, also the complainant, submitted a petition with the court to this end.

On January 11, Sarwar and Anisur lodged the cases against Khokon with the court of Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Rajesh Chowdhury.

After two hearings, the magistrate took the cases into cognisance and recorded statements of both the plaintiffs that day.

Later, the court set yesterday for passing orders in the cases. The cases were filed soon after Mayor Taposh said the remarks made by his predecessor Khokon against him at a human chain in front of the High Court on January 9 were "defamatory".

The next day, Taposh asked the petitioners to withdraw the cases. "I'm not involved with the cases. Two overenthusiastic lawyers filed those. I'm requesting them to withdraw the cases," Taposh told reporters in reply to a query at a press conference at the Nagar Bhawan.

The complainants alleged that Khokon made defamatory comments against Taposh at the human chain programme.

According to the case documents, Khokon said Taposh had been "talking big" against corruption after becoming the DSCC mayor, but such stories do not suit coming from him.

He said Taposh needs to be free from corruption first to make his administration free from graft.

Taposh transferred hundreds of crores of taka from the DSCC's coffers to Modhumoti Bank, which is owned by him, Khokon also alleged.

Through the baseless and fabricated comments, Khokon defamed Taposh, the case statements said.

The problem started on December 8 last year when the DSCC demolished several hundred illegal shops at Phulbaria Supermarket-2 in Gulistan, which were built violating the main design of the supermarket. Traders and shop owners protested the DSCC move back then.

On December 29, former mayor Khokon and six others were sued on charges of embezzling Tk 34.89 crore.

Delwar Hossain, president of Traders-Owners Association of the supermarket, lodged the case with the court of Metropolitan Magistrate Ashek Imam.

20 more die from Covid, 702 test positive in a day

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh's Covid-19 tally reached 529,031 yesterday with the detection of 702 new cases.

The number of local fatalities rose to 7,942 after the health authorities confirmed 20 more coronavirus-related deaths in 24 hours until morning.

So far, 3,485,257 samples have been tested, 15,097 in the last 24 hours.

A handout from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) said the detection rate was 4.65 percent while the overall detection rate is 15.18 percent.

Bangladesh reported its first cases on March 8 and the first death on March 18. Until the morning, 473,855 patients (89.57 percent) have recovered.

"The mortality rate is 1.5 percent," the DGHS said.

Pilot vaccination

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General Hospital, the minister said.

A top official of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), involved with the vaccination process, said a special flight will carry the vaccine doses gifted by the Indian government.

The vaccines will be kept in the cold storage facilities of the Central Medicine Store Depot, Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) and the Teigaon Health Complex in Dhaka, Prof ABM Khurshid Alam, director general of DGHS, told reporters.

Earlier in the day, the health minister said two lakh people will be vaccinated in the country every day once the government gets the 50 lakh vaccine doses from SII.

The minister also said there was no plan to start vaccination with any important person of the country.

"The people of the country are the VIPs to us. Those who are in need of it first, will be given [the vaccine] first," said the health minister while responding to a query on whether Bangladesh would follow the example of starting the vaccination process with VIPs, like many other countries.

Imprisoned Chinese rights lawyer in poor health: wife

AFP, Beijing

A Chinese lawyer nominated for a top human rights award is in poor health after years in prison, his wife told AFP yesterday.

Yu Wensheng was detained in Beijing in January 2018 in front of his young son just hours after he wrote an open letter calling for constitutional reforms, including multi-candidate elections.

He was tried in secret and sentenced to four years in prison last June for "inciting subversion of state power".

"His physical state is very poor. His right hand is deformed and trembles so much that he cannot write," his wife Xu

Yan told AFP.

Yu was nominated Monday for the Martin Ennals Award, which organisers hope will shine a light on abuses in authoritarian states.

Xu said her husband's nomination "not only supports and honours (him), but is also an encouragement and affirmation to other human rights lawyers and defenders".

China has seen a dramatic crackdown on civil liberties and freedoms since President Xi Jinping took power in 2012, with hundreds of human rights lawyers and activists detained in recent years.

Dhaka expects it to start by June

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"The meeting itself is a positive step. It is a new initiative and we started it with new vigour in the new year," Masud said.

In the meeting yesterday, Dhaka stated that it has no enmity with Myanmar and that the Rohingya crisis should be resolved quickly as many bilateral and regional development issues are being hampered due to the crisis.

Bangladesh also asserted that it wants to advance in light of a bilateral arrangement and proposed village-based repatriation, meaning if Roingyas of one village go to Rakhine together, they will feel safe. This is also more practical than an arrangement under which only a few of a village will return at a time, the foreign secretary said.

Myanmar has so far verified 42,000 Rohingyas out of the 840,000 listed.

Asked about Myanmar's response, Masud said the Myanmar side mentioned that they want to start the repatriation with the 42,000 verified Rohingyas. "We said the number is not important here, rather the issue of confidence of the Rohingyas is."

The issue can be settled in the Joint Working Group-level meeting due in the first week of next month.

Both China and Myanmar showed flexibility during the meeting that began at 2:00pm.

Masud said Bangladesh asked for the presence of the international community, especially the UN, India, Japan and ASEAN, apart from China, in Rakhine during the repatriation. Although China and Myanmar were positive about Dhaka's proposal, no

concrete decision was made in this regard.

About creating conducive conditions in Rakhine, the foreign secretary said it is required for the Rohingyas' voluntary return. Dhaka also requested Naypyitaw to send its delegation to Bangladesh to convince the Rohingyas, he added.

Masud said some vested quarters oppose repatriation and Bangladesh would work to control them.

Asked how effectively China can play its role in Rohingya repatriation, he said China always wanted the issue to be resolved bilaterally.

"We have faith in China as it is a powerful country. It is also a matter of credibility for China. It also has economic interests."

Myanmar said Rohingyas would have to give consent that they would abide by the laws of Myanmar and won't do anything against the state. It also mentioned about the so-called Arakan Roingya Salvation Army, said Masud.

"We said there might be some armed criminal gangs, but they don't have any religious or political ideology. We are also trying to control them," he added.

The meeting decided to set up a hotline between the director general-level officials of Dhaka and Naypyitaw to settle any issues arising.

Dhaka, meanwhile, requested Naypyitaw to speed up the Rohingya verification process. It also proposed holding JWG- and secretary-level meetings in February and March.

"We want to take forward the discussion we had today to resolve the crisis," Masud said.

US readies for inauguration of 46th president

FROM PAGE 1

morning, Trump is expected to issue scores of pardons, with speculation rife over who might make the list.

The latest indications are that Trump will not take the legally dubious step of issuing himself and his children preemptive pardons.

Outside the White House fence, central Washington has taken on a dystopian look ahead of Biden's inauguration, swarming with National Guard troops and largely emptied of ordinary people.

Covid-19 restrictions meant the swearing-in ceremony of the 46th president of the United States at noon today (17:00 GMT) was always due to be sparsely attended. But fears of rioting attacks in the wake of the pro-Trump riot in the Capitol building on January 6 have triggered unprecedented deployments of armed soldiers, concrete barriers and secure areas dubbed "green" and "red" zones.

Adding to the tension, the Senate is expected to put Trump on trial soon, following his record second impeachment by the House of Representatives over the Capitol riot.

Biden, a veteran Democratic senator who also served as vice president to Barack Obama, was set to travel to Washington with his wife Jill Biden from their hometown of Wilmington,

Delaware.

Together with incoming vice president Kamala Harris -- the first woman ever to hold the job -- Biden was due to deliver an evening address on the Covid-19 crisis, from the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool.

This will give the incoming president and vice president a first glimpse of a city transformed for their inauguration.

The grassy Mall area, barred to the public, has been filled with some 200,000 American flags to represent the people who at any other inauguration would have come to witness history. Fifty six pillars of light will beam up to represent the 50 US states and territories.

Another eye-catching number is the more than 20,000 National Guards troops on duty, many of them carrying automatic rifles and dressed in full combat gear.

Illustrating the level of worry after the attack by the pro-Trump mob, the defense department said that all Guard troops were being vetted by the FBI and military for possible threats.

Biden is coming in with a strong message of unity, insisting that he can bring a divided country back to the center and confront the nation's multiple crises, starting with Covid-19, together.

To symbolize the new spirit, Biden has invited the two top senators

Acute crisis hits many areas in city

FROM PAGE 1

The official said he was recently receiving information that gas pressure was ranging between 0 and 2 psi in some areas of the capital.

Due to the poor gas pressure, city residents in many areas are finding it difficult to cook food in the morning and afternoon.

Residents of the capital's East Rajabazar, Jigatola, Mohammadpur, Adabar, Bhatara, Badda, Banastee, Mirpur, Pallabi and Gendaria areas complained that they were suffering from a shortage of gas supply.

"For the last two weeks, we cannot use the stove from 7:00am to 4:00pm to cook meals as there is no gas supply during this period," said Sabbir Ahmed from Jigatola.

Falguni Isalm Ria, a homemaker from Ambagan in Moghbazar, said she

needs to finish cooking by 11:00am every day before the gas supply dries up. The supply becomes normal after 3:00pm, she added.

Sujan Takulder from Gandaria said his wife needs to get up from bed very early in the morning to cook meals as gas supply stops around 9:00am every day. Ahmed Rahian, a resident of South Banashree, said they do not receive gas supply from early morning to noon.

Md Tazul Islam Majumder, director (operation) at Gas Transmission Company Limited (GTCL), said they cannot maintain the load balance if the supply of LNG to them is less than 525 mcmcf per day.

"We didn't have the required LNG supply since last November and therefore, the customers are suffering at places."

Tazul, however, said there were directives from the government to the

gas distribution companies to keep the supply for households and fertiliser factories at normal level.

The government also instructed the authorities concerned to reduce gas supply to the power sector temporarily, he added.

Rupantarita Prakritik Gas Company Limited, the state-run agency in charge of LNG imports into Bangladesh, had cancelled its plan to import two shipments of 138,000 cubic metres of LNG each for delivery in November and December last year.

"The LNG gas price in the international block market has recently spiked suddenly. That is why we had to cancel two shipments," said an official of the company.

The Titas Gas MD said they were trying to make the gas supply situation normal by Friday.