

BANGLADESH UPDATE

122
New cases in 24hrs

15,80,872
Total cases

28,047
Deaths

15,45,403
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

5,364,079
Deaths

274,125,258
Total cases

6th phase of UP polls on Jan 31

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The sixth and final phase of Union Parishad elections will be held on January 31, the Election Commission announced yesterday.

A total of 219 union parishads across the country will go to polls that day.

All the elections will be held using electronic voting machine, Election Commission's Secretary Humayun Kabir Khandaker said while announcing the election schedule after an Election Commission meeting at its office in the capital.

According to the schedule, candidates for the posts of chairman, member and reserved seats for women will be able to submit their nominations to the returning officers until January 3.

The evaluation of nomination papers will be held on January 6 and the last date for withdrawal of candidacy is January 13.

EC Secretary Humayun said there

were 4,578 UPs in Bangladesh. In the first three phases they held elections to 2,226 UPs. At least 1,547 UPs are going to polls in the fourth and fifth phases.

"The five-year tenure of another 325 UPs has ended. Of them, we are announcing the election schedule for 219 UPs. Elections to the rest UPs will take place later," he said.

A total of 707 union parishads will go to polls on January 5 in the fifth phase. Elections to 840 union parishads will be held on December 26 in the fourth phase. Some 1,000 UPs went to the third phase election on November 28.

A total of 833 union parishads went to the polls in the second phase on November 11.

In the first phase, elections were held in 204 UPs on June 21 and 160 UPs on September 20.

Meanwhile, the EC has decided in principle to add the word Bir Muktiyoddha on the NID cards of freedom fighters.

It's bedlam at Dhaka airport

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crowded and extremely noisy. There is no place to sit. It is even hard to buy food and water. Travelling through this airport is stressful."

The check-in and immigration counters are failing to cope with 12,000 to 15,000 passengers of 110 international flights in just 16 hours, instead of 24.

The chaos seems to peak between 7:00pm and 12:00am when around 3,000 passengers depart on 14 to 15 flights, said airlines employees.

Migrant workers leaving for the United Arab Emirates have been suffering at the HSA since late September when the Gulf country made it mandatory for arriving passengers to test negative for Covid-19 six hours prior to boarding their flights.

An estimated 3,000 to 5,000 passengers flying to the UAE every day come to the airport eight to nine hours before their flights for the Covid tests. They have no place to rest.

Visiting the airport thrice recently, these correspondents witnessed how the passengers, especially the ones going to the UAE, have to sit on their bags in absence of adequate seating arrangements.

"After reaching the airport, I started looking for a cart. I searched all the six entrance gates of Terminal-2 and the car park for 20 minutes. But there was nothing," said Abdul Mazid.

Travellers are often seen carrying or dragging their luggage.

Abdur Rashid, who was scheduled to fly to Jeddah at 7:30pm on Friday, said, "I reached the airport around

4:00pm as my airlines told me to check-in by 5:30pm. But it's 5:45pm, and I am still waiting in the queue to enter the terminal."

Around 30 people were ahead of him in the queue when he talked to this newspaper.

"Could you please get us mosquito repellent instead of asking questions?" quipped one passenger in the queue.

Inside the departure lounge, there is another long queue to get the Covid reports signed by an airport health officer. Another long queue is seen in front of the immigration counters.

Sumiya Akhter who was flying to Canada with her three children on Tuesday said she gave Tk 1,000 to an employee of an airlines to get their Covid certificate signed.

On Friday night, over a dozen flights scheduled to leave for Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Jeddah, Doha, Bahrain, Dammam, Sharjah, and Ras Al Khaimah, were delayed by 30 minutes to two hours.

Contacted, Group Captain AHM Touhid-Ul Ahsan, executive director of HSA, told The Daily Star on Friday that the authorities increased the number of staffers, security measures, and counters to address the issue.

All the 42 departure and 48 arrival counters at the immigration are now operating round the clock so that flights are not delayed for immigration purposes, he said, adding that more measures were being taken.

State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism M Mahbub Ali last week said 600 unusable carts will be repaired soon and 2,500 more will be procured.

MP's sign 'forged'

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its depositors.

First Finance wrote to the central bank in February this year, seeking its permission to approve the loan, according to the letter from the NBFJ signed by its then acting managing director Md Tuhin Reza, who is currently the additional managing director of the institution.

The BB rejected the prayer.

In June, the NBFJ filed another application with the BB requesting it to reconsider its decision. This prompted the central bank to inspect the matter.

During the inspection, the BB found discrepancies in information provided by First Finance and scrapped the application for the second time, said BB officials.

Amjad Hossain did not give up. He wrote to the BB governor on September 9 to clear the loan request after allegedly forging the signature of Tanvir Shakil Joy, a ruling party lawmaker from Sirajganj-1.

As BB officials contacted Joy over the matter, he was left astounded. Joy said he knew nothing about the letter.

"My office did not issue the letter. The signature is not mine. It is a fake letter. It was sent to you by a vested quarter to tarnish my image," he wrote to the BB governor in October.

Joy told The Daily Star last week he wrote the letter to the governor seeking action against the culprits who tried to secure the loan by forging his signature.

In this situation, BB asked the CID and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) to take steps.

Asked about the matter, Amjad Hossain claimed that a former driver of one of his friends helped him send the "MP's letter" to the central bank.

"I don't have any contact with Joy," he said.

He said he also wrote to the finance ministry for clearing the loan for Megh City Complex after which the ministry forwarded the letter to the BB.

He claimed that the central bank had already given a no-objection certificate to First Finance to disburse the loan.

But First Finance is now in a liquidity crunch, which is why it can't release the loan, he claimed.

Megh City Complex is located in Bogura. Its construction has remained halted for five years due to fund shortage.

Humayun Kabir, special superintendent of police of CID (organised crime), said they had already launched an enquiry into the matter.

Contacted, Mohammed Mosharaf Hossain, managing director of First Finance, said the incident happened before he joined the NBFJ in July.

"We will take all steps to safeguard the interests of our depositors," he said.

Tuhin Reza, additional managing director of the NBFJ, did not reply to text messages and pick up calls from The Daily Star.

First Finance is not in good shape. Its deposit stood at Tk 638 crore as of June this year. It borrowed Tk 120 crore from banks and other non-banking institutions.

State-run Investment Corporation of Bangladesh has had a deposit of Tk 118 crore with First Finance, but it failed to return it following maturity of the fund.

Similarly, the First Finance owes Tk 20 to Janata Bank, Tk 22 crore to BIFFL, Tk 10 crore to Social Islami Bank Ltd and Tk 5 crore to Karmasangsthan Bank. The lenders have complained to the BB about First Finance's failure to return the deposits.

First Finance's outstanding loans were Tk 900 crore, of which more than 30 percent are non-performing loans, according to data from the central bank.

"We are trying to recover the non-performing loans so that we can repay depositors," said Mohammed Mosharaf Hossain.



The size of crowds waiting at the departure lounge of Dhaka airport is scandalous, especially since most of the individuals are waiting to get their Covid tests verified. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Vaccination key to sustain progress

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economic progress as well as its handling of the pandemic.

He shared the future challenges and opportunities, along with WB's engagement with the country.

The global lender provided \$500 million for Bangladesh's vaccination programme, where so far 24.7 percent of the eligible population has been vaccinated.

"Full vaccination is absolutely critical because we don't want to have surprises," said Schafer in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star at a city hotel on December 9.

He observed that vaccines are now available in the global market, but as the market itself is very dynamic, it needs to be watched.

"If there is an overall consensus that everybody should get booster shots, we need to prepare for that."

From 1972, the WB provided \$35 billion to Bangladesh and projects worth \$13.8 billion are now under implementation.

During the pandemic, the bank provided support for urgent needs, including ramping up testing and treatment facilities -- ICU beds, ventilators, oxygen concentrators, vaccines -- and social safety nets as millions of people faced losses of livelihoods.

According to a WB estimate, extreme poverty has increased from 11.9 percent in 2019 to 12.9 percent in 2020 or by 1.8 million, but as growth strengthened in 2021, earnings and employment are recovering.

In 2021, the poverty rate is expected to reduce to 12.5 percent.

In comparison with other countries, the country's poverty rate is relatively robust, he said.

Though the economic growth came down from around eight percent to 2-3 percent during pandemic last year, the good thing is that the growth was still positive, Schafer said, congratulating Bangladesh on its golden jubilee of independence.

"Bangladesh is a success case on a global scale, in terms of sustaining long periods of growth and reducing poverty... From one of the poorest countries of the world in 1971, it is now going to be an upper middle-income country in 10 years."

He believes women empowerment, good macroeconomic management and investment in infrastructure prominently contributed to the country's growth.

"Without infrastructure and investment, you would not have the growth of the private sector and the RMG industry," the WB official said.

"You need a stronger private sector. For that, you need to make sure you have a policy and regulatory framework that attracts investment. It should include digital technology that complement the RMG and other services sectors."

About the credit possibility of International Development Association, a part of WB that provides loans at very low or zero interest rates, he said Bangladesh got approximately \$2 billion every year over the last few years, which is above the set allocation.

Schafer said the country has been very successful in using that allocated envelop and then receiving more from other countries that were not able to absorb their envelop, adding, "This is testimony to the strong programme and growth of the economy. I hope this will continue."

However, moving projects from designing to quick implementation will be critical.

He suggested broadening tax-net to increase revenue.

"With higher revenue, it is possible to invest [the amount] that is needed in physical infrastructure, education and healthcare."

Schafer also suggested having a very efficient financial sector to provide financial liquidity and resources to the private sector that needs long-term borrowing opportunities.

Bringing in more foreign investors is critical because it connects you to the rest of the world and brings innovation, he said.

The WB is launching a "Country Partnership Framework" for Bangladesh for the next five years. The areas that will be featured are developing human capital, healthcare system, quality of education, urban development and low-carbon emission, and inclusion will be prominently featured.

"Now enrolment rates are excellent. But more can be done with regard to enhancing quality [of education] so that levels of numeracy and literacy improve. It will be absolutely critical to prepare a child born today to have the [adequate] skills when they are 18 years old."

He further said, "Investment in infrastructure is key. Of them, one is urban development, which needs to be planned. With increased growth, there will be more vehicles. So, we need alternatives. In the current [state of] Dhaka, you know how many hours are spent just in traffic."

Bangladesh has a very good track record in disaster preparedness, he said. "But more can be done to improve resilience in urban, agriculture and other areas."

"More can also be done to make sure women remain in the labour force and, for that, more childcare centers need to be established."

Some neighbouring countries have hydro-power opportunities that can be harnessed, he said.

The WB can support Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) by providing a platform for dialogue, analysis and investment, but it's the countries' sovereign decision whether to join.

"Eventually, we need to better utilize the waterways, which will be low-cost and environment-friendly."

He emphasised on the Motor Vehicle Act among BBIN countries, which can radically improve regional trade.

Mild cold wave likely from today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A mild cold wave is likely to sweep over the country today and tomorrow, according to Bangladesh Meteorological Department officials.

"The minimum temperature may range between nine and 10 degrees Celsius in the western part of the country," said AKM Ruhul Kuddus, meteorologist of Storm Warning Centre at the Met office.

He said districts, including Rajshahi, Jashore, Pabna, Kushtia, Satkhira, Khulna, Faridpur, Bogura, Dinajpur and Rangpur, will face the cold wave on December 19 and December 20.

However, the temperature may rise after December 20, reports UNB.

The lowest temperature in the country was recorded at 9.4°C at Tentulia in Panchagarh around 9:00am yesterday. The highest temperature was recorded at 29.7 degrees in Teknaf of Cox's Bazar.

The weather may remain dry with temporary partly cloudy sky over the country. There may be light morning fog may at places over the country, said the regular Met bulletin.

Night temperature may fall slightly but day temperature is likely to remain nearly unchanged over the country, it said.

Covid booster

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doses of vaccines at least nine months ago would also be eligible.

Gradually, the programme will be expanded all over the country, he said, without sharing further details.

A press release from the health ministry, however, said the minister would disclose a detailed plan in today's programme.

Earlier on Monday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina instructed to introduce a booster dose programme considering the emergence of the new Omicron variant of concern.

So far, the country's 25.89 percent population have been inoculated with double dose vaccines against the 80 percent target.

In yesterday's event, Zahid Maleque said there is no shortage of Covid-19 vaccine right now.

Currently, the government has a stock of some 4.45 crore doses of the Covid-19 vaccine while two crore more doses will arrive next month, according to the minister.

Urging people to follow health guidelines, the minister said, "Omicron is very contagious. We have done everything possible to control Omicron transmission. However, everyone should be careful."

He also urged people to take vaccines to get protection.

Our Manikganj correspondent contributed to this report.

Deforestation, climate change making outdoor work unsafe: study

AFP, Washington

A double-blow of forest destruction and climate change has caused temperatures to soar in many tropical locations, making outdoor work unsafe for millions of workers, according to a study published Friday.

Between 2003-2018, the study found, about 4.9 million people lost at least half an hour per day of working conditions at a temperature recognized as safe.

"Tropical locations are already on the edge of being too hot and humid to safely work because of climate change," said Luke Parsons, lead author on the paper published in the journal One Earth.

"Deforestation may push these places over the edge into even more unsafe work environments."

Parsons' research further found that 91,000 people lost more than two hours of safe working temperatures per day -- the overwhelming majority of them in Asia.

Deforestation is already known to be associated with an increase in local temperature, due to the fact trees block out the sun's radiation, provide shade, and cool the air via evapotranspiration -- transporting water from the soil and evaporating it from their leaf surface.

But as Parsons explained in an email to AFP, "so far, many arguments for conserving tropical forests have been based on biodiversity or global climate mitigation."

"We hope that this study provides additional information about the relationship between local forest health and human health that will be considered as the costs and benefits of deforestation are compared," he said.

Over the study period, the researchers found that the temperature increase linked to deforestation was much larger than that from recent climate change.

JP to push for EC formation law tomorrow

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On the first day, President Abdul Hamid is expected to sit with the JP, the main opposition in the parliament, at 4:00pm, according to officials of the Bangabhaban.

The series of dialogues is planned to be completed within 15-20 days, they said.

Talking to The Daily Star, President's Press Secretary Joyal Abedin said the president would sit with Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Inu) on December 22 at the Bangabhaban after one day's recess.

The rest of the registered political parties would be invited for dialogues gradually, he added.

Several political parties, including components of the ruling Awami League-led grand alliance, said that the dialogue with the president is nothing but a formality as they said nothing new will come out.

Top leaders of several political parties, wishing anonymity, told The Daily Star that the last two ECs were formed through the dialogue and search committee.

There is no opportunity of creating any exception this time, they said.

BNP is yet to take a final decision on participating in the dialogue.

Party insiders, however, hinted that BNP may not join the dialogue as they were aware of the fact that the EC would be formed as per the will of the ruling party.

The next parliamentary election will be held under the new commission that will be formed through a search committee formed by the president.

As a result, under whom the next election is taking place and how the commission will be formed -- these issues have become important to different political parties.

It is widely believed in the political arena that in the previous two phases (in 2012 and 2017), the EC was formed mainly with the people of the ruling Awami League's and its allies' choice.

It is believed that this time too it will not be an exception. As a result, the dialogue with the president is nothing more than a formality, commented different political parties.

Asked, Jatiya Party Chairman and deputy leader of the opposition GM Quader yesterday said while holding dialogue with the president they would give importance on the formation of law.

GM Quader said apart from this they would urge the president to

strengthen the EC in line with the Constitution.

Talking to this correspondent, JP Secretary General Mujibul Haque Chunnun said the JP top leaders would hold a meeting today on finalising the party's course of discussion while meeting the president.

He said an eight-member JP delegation, led by the party's chairman GM Quader, will lead in the dialogue.

According to sources, in the invitation letter sent by the Bangabhaban, the dialogue with different political parties has been termed as "view exchange meeting".

The president is going to hold the dialogue as the tenure of the current EC under the leadership of Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda expires on February 14.

This is for the third time the president of the republic is holding discussions with registered political parties ahead of appointing a search committee to recommend names for election commissioner posts.

Hamid, in December 2016, held a similar dialogue that resulted in the KM Nurul Huda-led EC that gained huge controversy for its failure to hold a free and fair election at national and local levels.

UN talks adjourn without deal to regulate 'killer robots'

REUTERS, Geneva

Countries taking part in UN talks on autonomous weapons stopped short of launching negotiations on an international treaty to govern their use, instead agreeing merely to continue discussions.

The International Committee of the Red Cross and several NGOs had been pushing for negotiators to

begin work on an international treaty that would establish legally-binding new rules on the machine-operated weapons.

Unlike existing semi-autonomous weapons such as drones, fully-autonomous weapons have no human-operated "kill switch" and instead leave decisions over life and death to sensors, software and

machine processes.

Opponents say they raise the risks for civilians, pose problems for accountability and increase the chances of conflict escalation.

The Geneva talks, ongoing for eight years, have taken on new urgency since a UN panel report in March that said the first autonomous drone attack may have already occurred in Libya.