



The Daily Star

SECOND EDITION

www.thedailystar.net

Your Right to Know

JAMADIUL AWAL 24, 1443 HIJRI

16 PAGES PRICE : Tk12.00



"Politics has been wrested from the hands of politicians. Politicians also have no place in parliament."
WORKERS PARTY PRESIDENT RASHED KHAN MENON DURING DIALOGUE WITH PRESIDENT ABDUL HAMID



"Omicron is a source of concern, but it should not be a source of panic."
US PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN ASSURES AMERICANS



"For sure there can be a good agreement... We know the parameters. Is that expected to happen now in the current dynamics? No."
ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER NAFTALI BENNETT ON IRAN NUCLEAR TALKS



4TH PHASE UP POLLS

AL sinks in its strongholds

Ruling party candidates' performance declining with every passing phase

PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE and ASIFUR RAHMAN

Awami League candidates in Faridpur have never faced defeats as comprehensive as the ones they suffered in the fourth phase of union parishad polls held on Sunday.

Contenders of the ruling party had won all national elections from 1991 to 2018, except two by-polls, in Faridpur -- a district considered a bastion of AL.

But the picture was starkly different in Sunday's fourth phase of union parishad elections to 836 UPs.

Take the case of Boalmari upazila.

Out of 10 union parishads in the upazila, AL nominated candidates lost in nine.

In the third phase on November 28, the picture was also very dismal as AL aspirants lost in 14 out of 15 unions in Bhanga and Charbhadrans upazilas.

Faridpur's is not an isolated example. Ruling-party candidates fared miserably in Sunday's polls in many places like



Mymensingh, Sherpur, Kishoreganj and Sunamganj, regarded as strongholds of AL.

The Election Commission released unofficial results of 796 UPs out of 836 on Monday. Forty-eight AL candidates got walkovers.

Out of the 796 unions, AL aspirants could not even compete with their rivals in 230. Shockingly, AL candidates in 28 UPs lost their security deposits as a result of getting less than one-sixth of the total ballots cast.

Take some examples of the ruling party's humiliating defeats.

In Chiringa union under Chakaria upazila of Cox's Bazar, ruling party candidate Shahnewaj Rumel bagged only 67 votes. The total number of voters of the union is 10,436.

Awami League candidate Hasina Begum of Khatamadhupur union under Nilphamari's Syedpur upazila got 93 out of 17,496 votes.

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Farmers pluck boro saplings from a seedbed in Sylhet's Gowainghat upazila. Growers in the haor region are busy planting boro as they plan to harvest the crop before their land is inundated by flooding or onrush of water from upstream. This is the only crop grown in haor areas. The photo was taken on Sunday.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

CORRECTION

In the headline of our lead story yesterday, we inadvertently wrote "\$500m economy by next fiscal"; it should have been "\$500b economy by next fiscal". We sincerely apologise to our readers for this mistake.

SSC results tomorrow

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The results of this year's Secondary School Certificate and equivalent exams will be published on Thursday.

Prof Nehal Ahmed, chairman of the Dhaka Education Board, said the results will be handed over to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at a programme at the Bangabandhu International Conference Centre around 10:00am.

The PM will join the programme virtually and

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TEKNAF LAND PORT

Porous, powerless



MOHAMMAD SUMAN, back from Teknaf

On the face of it, Teknaf Land Port is as clean as a whistle.

The lone gateway to trade with Myanmar has little or no record of confiscation of Yaba or reported cases of tax evasion through the false declaration of goods.

But the ground reality suggests something else.

The land port with the poor scanning system, lack of security and absence of proper import-export documents has long been exposed to smuggling of illegal and contraband items like Yaba and tax evasion by dishonest traders.

- A racket forging documents to evade tax for years
- No automatic scanner machine or dog squad to check inflow of contraband goods
- Customs officials only check at best 2% of the goods manually by random sampling
- Some dishonest traders import high-tax items falsely declaring them as low taxable goods

The clandestine activities at the land port came to the fore following the arrest of Nurul Islam, a computer operator-turned-billionaire, on September 14.

Islam used to lead a racket that helped in the smuggling of Yaba and other goods and forged documents to evade tax in the land port for years, according to the Rapid Action Battalion.

He made a fortune of about Tk 460 crore, a far cry from his start as a computer operator at the port's customs house for a daily wage of Tk 130, Rab said.

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DIALOGUE WITH PRESIDENT ON EC

BNP decides not to join

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The BNP, if invited, will not join the dialogue with President Abdul Hamid over forming the new Election Commission.

Party leaders say they made the decision as they believe the talks will not yield any fruit.

Upon the invitation of the president, the party may send a letter to him detailing why it will not join the talks and the overall political situation in the country. The BNP will also ask Hamid to take initiatives to form a polls-time interim government to oversee the next general election, said party sources.

Speaking to The Daily Star yesterday, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir said, "We will not join the talks. Joining will mean nothing. We held talks twice earlier but we found those to be pointless."

The BNP standing committee, the highest policymaking body of the party, in a meeting on Monday unanimously decided that the party would not join the dialogue as it sees the initiative as "an attempt to snatch the people's voting rights".

BNP leaders said the president can hold talks but he cannot do anything without consultation with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and that's why participating in talks is nothing but "giving legitimacy to the process of forming the next EC".

"The entire electoral system has been destroyed. In our political culture, a free and fair election is not possible under a partisan government. So, dialogues should be held on formation of a polls-time government," Fakhru said.

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KHALEDA'S TREATMENT

No way to send her abroad

Law ministry opines

UNB, Dhaka

As per the law ministry's opinion there is no scope in law to allow BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia to go abroad for medical treatment, said Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan yesterday.

"The law ministry in its opinion said there is no scope in law to let Khaleda Zia go abroad for treatment. The law ministry gave its opinion with the explanation of the relevant law, and we're reviewing it," he said while talking to reporters at the Secretariat.

The opinion of the ministry will be sent to the prime minister after its review, the home minister said.

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SECURITY COOPERATIONS

Dhaka wants discussion before US decision

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh wants prior discussions with the US before the latter takes any decision regarding security cooperation.

Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen commented to journalists after an inter-ministerial meeting on the US' Leahy Law at the secretariat.

"We will communicate with the US. If they have any allegations against any organisations of Bangladesh, they should let us know before making any decision," he said.

If the US says they have credible information on any organisation, Bangladesh would seek to learn about the sources of the information, he said.

"We will seek adequate time to explain the measures taken by Bangladesh and its position," he added.

The meeting discussed various aspects of Leahy

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Nurse Shahnaz Begum having a chat with Sayma Chowdhury, 96, a resident of the capital's Dhanmondi, before giving her a booster shot of Covid-19 vaccine at Dhaka Medical College Hospital. The government yesterday officially started administering booster doses to senior citizen aged above 60 and frontliners. Story on page 12.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Another rail project taking forever

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

In June 2018, the Bangladesh Railways took up a Tk 3,602 crore project that would substantively enhance its operational capacity in three years.

Come June 2021, let alone complete the project -- which entails procuring 40 locomotives, 125 luggage vans and 1,000 wagons -- it has failed to complete the signing of agreements with all vendors, in a development that has become characteristic of the BR.

Of the 37 projects it is implementing, 26 -- including this one -- has been extended at least once.

At present, this project's deadline is June 2022. Given that only yesterday the BR has signed the fourth of the five contracts needed for the project, another lengthy extension is most definitely in the offing.

Another three years after the expiry of the revised deadline of June 2022 is needed, Project Director Mizanur Rahman told The Daily Star yesterday.

Prodded on the delay, Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan largely blamed the pandemic.

"But I would not say that there was no laxity on our part," he added.

Apart from the two reasons, Rahman said the lengthy tendering process retarded the pace of the project, which is largely being funded with a loan from the Asian Development Bank.

"We have to take concurrence from ADB at every step -- time extension is normal in almost all the projects," he added.

The BR is implementing its nine projects with loans from the Manila-based multilateral lender and the deadline for all but two had to be extended, document shows.

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