

## No need for UN help over nat'l polls

### Says Momen

#### STAR REPORT

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen has said that Bangladesh is mature enough and there is no need to take help from the United Nations for the country's national election.

He, however, said the government has no objection to election observation by foreign observers.

"There is no need for us to take any cooperation from the United Nations. We are mature enough. We have founded those institutions that are needed for a fair, transparent and acceptable election," he said.

The minister made the remarks while speaking to reporters after a meeting with UN Resident Coordinator in Bangladesh Gwyn Lewis yesterday, reports UNB.

Momen said foreign observers should see how fair and transparent elections are held in Bangladesh in a festive atmosphere. He said that foreign observers can learn from the polls in Bangladesh.

Responding to a question about the detention of Prothom Alo reporter Shamsuzzaman Shams, the minister said he was arrested for "child exploitation".

"The second issue is that he made fun of our independence. The people of Bangladesh won't accept it," he added.

Talking about the Rohingya issue, he praised the US for providing continuous support to the refugees.

"United States has been cooperating since the first day, and it is still doing so. They have showed no negligence. But many other countries gave a lot of aid in the past, and now they have cut much of the aid."

#### 'RAB NOT USED FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES'

Asked about a recent Deutsche Welle (DW) documentary that claimed that the Rab was "used politically", Momen said it was "a source of fun".

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A Palestinian kicks a teargas canister back at Israeli soldiers during clashes following a raid by Israeli forces in the city of Nablus in the occupied West Bank yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Ukraine army still 'holds' Bakhmut

Says Kyiv; Moscow to move tactical nuke weapons to Belarus' west

#### AGENCIES

Ukraine's military said its troops were locked in combat with Russian forces around the administration building of Bakhmut yesterday, and it poured scorn on Russian claims that mercenary fighters had captured the eastern city after months of warfare.

"The enemy has not stopped its assault of Bakhmut. However, Ukrainian defenders are courageously holding the city as they repel numerous enemy attacks," the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine said on its Facebook page.

A Ukrainian spokesman said the Russians had raised a victory flag not over the building but over "some kind of toilet".

In Moscow, the Kremlin accused Ukraine of being behind a bomb blast at a cafe in St Petersburg on Sunday that killed a prominent Russian pro-war blogger. Russia said it had arrested a woman

suspected of blowing up the blogger.

The battle for Bakhmut has been one of the bloodiest of the conflict, now in its second year, with many casualties on both sides and much of the eastern city destroyed by bombardments.

Front lines have shifted backwards and forwards in street-by-street fighting.

The head of the Wagner mercenary force, which has spearheaded the Kremlin's campaign to encircle and capture Bakhmut, said on Sunday his troops had raised a Russian flag on the administrative building in the city centre.

Yevgeny Prigozhin acknowledged that Ukrainian troops were still holding some positions. But he said in video posted on Telegram: "From a legal point of view, Bakhmut has been taken. The enemy is concentrated in the western parts."

Prigozhin has previously made claims that were premature.

The Ukrainian military however said yesterday that fighting was still going on in Bakhmut as well as in several other towns.

Serhiy Cherevatyi, spokesperson for the eastern military command, said the Russian claim to have captured the city was false. Clashes were taking place around the city council building, he said.

"Bakhmut is Ukrainian and they have not captured anything and are very far from doing that, to put it mildly," he told Reuters.

"They raised the flag over some kind of toilet. They attached it to the side of who knows what, hung their rag and said they had captured the city. Well good, let them think they've taken it," Cherevatyi said by telephone.

Meanwhile Moscow's ambassador to Minsk said on Sunday that Russia would move nuclear weapons close to the western borders of Belarus - a move that would place them at Nato's threshold.

## One dies after being hit by train in Joypurhat

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

A man died after he was hit by a train in Joypurhat town last morning.

The deceased Jahidul Islam, 55, was a resident of Masterpara village under the Sadar upazila.

"The Rajshahi-bound Uttara Express that left Parbatipur, hit the victim as he was crossing the Dakbanga level crossing in the early hours, killing him on the spot" Santahar Railway Police Station Officer-in-Charge (OC) Moktar Hossain told The Daily Star.

Police recovered the body and sent it to Joypurhat Modern Hospital.

## Man jailed for 10 years in Lakshmipur drugs case

BSS, Lakshmipur

A Lakshmipur court yesterday sentenced a man to 10 years imprisonment in a 2018 narcotics case.

The court also fined the convict Md Salam, 30, Tk 10,000, in default of which, he would have to spend another six months in jail.

District and Sessions Judge Court Judge Md Rahibul Islam pronounced the verdict in the afternoon.

According to the case statement, on October 30, 2018, Salam was arrested with 1,500 yaba pills in the Sadar upazila's Dalabazar area.

The same day, Sub-Inspector Abu Naser of Lakshmipur Sadar Model Police Station filed a case against him under the Narcotics Control Act.

## 3 get life imprisonment in Bagerhat rape case

UNB, Bagerhat

A Bagerhat court sentenced three men to life imprisonment for raping a girl in 2020 in the district's Fakirhat upazila.

The convicts are Md Mamun, Md Feroz Nikari, and Ibrahim Biswas.

Judge of Bagerhat Women and Child Repression Prevention Tribunal-1 SM Saiful Islam delivered the judgment on Sunday.

At the same time, the court fined the convicts Tk 10,00,000, in default of which, they would have to spend one more year in prison.

According to the prosecution, an NGO worker was raped and photographed in a rented house in 2020 by a few men at Mait Kamra village of Fakirhat upazila. The next day, the woman filed a case with Fakirhat Police Station mentioning the three names.

## Shams freed on bail after 5 days

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Shams passed the test. Shams has many good friends and well-wishers. Everyone was with him. There was great support at home and abroad."

Praising Shams' mother for her patience, courage and strength, the Prothom Alo editor said Shams' reuniting with her mother is the biggest reward.

The Daily Star Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam was present at the Prothom Alo office to greet Shams.

"We believe in journalism with values. We believe in independent and objective journalism. We are neither in favour nor against anyone. We are for the country. Danger befell Shams while he was doing this brand of journalism. It's part of the profession," The Daily Star editor said.

Prothom Alo Managing Editor Anisul Haque said Shams will not stop writing. Freedom means telling people's stories and stories of hunger.

After meeting his colleagues, Shams left the Prothom Alo office for his home around 9:00pm.

The 37-year-old is the younger brother of the slain Detective Branch assistant commissioner Robiul



Karim, who died at the Holey Artisan Bakery attack on July 1, 2016.

While posting on social media a report written by Shams on March 26, the Independence Day, the Prothom Alo made a "card" with a quote of a labourer named Zakir Hossain. Though the card contained Zakir's quote, it had the photo of an adolescent boy.

The mistake was noticed within 17 minutes, and the card was removed. Besides, corrections were made to the report and the news was again

published online mentioning the corrections.

Around 4:00am on March 29, Shams was picked up by law enforcers in plainclothes, hours after he was sued under the DSA.

Apart from Shams, Prothom Alo Editor and Publisher Matiur Rahman, an unnamed photographer, and unnamed others were accused later in another case filed under the DSA.

Journalist organisations and rights bodies condemned the incident and demanded his immediate release.

## No EVM in next JS polls

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EVM supplier, Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory, had said Tk 1,260 crore would be needed to refurbish 1.1 lakh EVMs. The commission had sought the money from the finance ministry, but the ministry expressed its inability to pay that amount, he said.

Jahangir added that the EC does not have the money needed to refurbish the EVMs and that imports of required components take time, which the EC does not have either.

"Moreover, many political parties could not reach a consensus on the use of EVMs in the national election. The commission may have made the decision considering all this."

The EVM issue came to the fore after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at an Awami League meeting on May 7 last year said voting machines would be used in all 300 constituencies.

The EC in late August decided to use EVMs in up to 150 constituencies. It had then the capacity to use EVMs in at best 70 constituencies as about 30 percent of the 1.5 lakh machines it had were serviceable.

On August 24, Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal said, "The decision to use EVMs was the Election Commission's. The commission will handle the polls, not the political parties. It is the commission's big responsibility to conduct the election."

The EC made the decision despite opposition from major political parties, like the BNP and the main opposition in parliament Jatiya Party (Ershad), Gono Forum and Communist Party of Bangladesh and others.

At least 19 of the 39 registered political parties directly opposed the use of EVMs. At least 10 of them voiced their opposition during their talks with the EC between July 17 and July 31 last year.

Nine parties, including the BNP, skipped the talks and opposed the EVM use. The BNP and several other parties also stayed away from another EC dialogue over the use of EVMs in June.

During the EC's talks, only three parties - ruling Awami League, Samyabadi Dal and Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh - said they want the machines used in the polls.

Thirty-nine eminent citizens on September 6 issued a statement urging the EC not to use EVMs. The statement said that use of the machines might provoke political

debate and erode people's confidence in the commission.

After deciding to use the EVMs in August, the EC prepared a project involving Tk 8,711 crore to buy 2 lakh new machines, but the Planning Commission in January this year sent back the proposal, saying the government could not afford it "in the current global context".

Many had then criticised the EC move to spend half a billion dollars amid an economic crisis.

The EC in February sought Tk 1,260 crore from the government to repair the old machines.

The ministry declined the EC proposal in a letter, which was read out at yesterday's meeting, sources said.

Several officials who attended the meeting said one commissioner wanted the EVMs used in some constituencies, but in the end, the commissioners were unanimous in their decision not to use EVMs.

#### WHAT PARTIES SAY

AL presidium member Abdur Rahman yesterday said the EC has met the BNP's demand. "I hope they will take part in the election since their demand has been met. We are not unhappy..."

The BNP and like-minded political parties have been pressing for a 10-point demand that includes the formation of an impartial caretaker or interim government that would form a neutral EC to ensure a level-playing field for all parties.

"Election using EVMs or paper ballots is not the issue. We will not participate in any election under the incumbent government. The Election Commission's decision does not make any sense to us," BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir told this newspaper yesterday.

Jatiya Party Secretary General Mujibul Haque said his party welcomed the EC's decision. "Election will take place using ballot papers and it's all right. But how will the Election Commission be able to create a conducive atmosphere for a holding free, fair and neutral election?" he said.

Communist Party of Bangladesh President Ruhin Hossain Prince said that on paper the EC is independent but the reality is different. "... The EC would not be able to hold a free and fair election under a partisan government even if it wanted to do so... so we need to overhaul the existing election system."

## Sultana died

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was detained on her way to work.

A day after her death, a three-member medical board, led by Prof Kafil, conducted the autopsy and finalised the report on April 1 after laboratory tests.

On Sunday afternoon, the final report was handed over to Rajshahi Metropolitan Police.

Rofikul Alam, an additional deputy commissioner of RMP, said the report would be placed before the High Court.

The final autopsy report said, "The mentioned injuries in the autopsy report were not sufficient to cause the death of the deceased."

It also mentioned there was "a small laceration" on the left side of her forehead and cannula prick marks on her right elbow.

Montu said Sultana was completely healthy before her detention.

"When she was admitted to hospital, it was the Rab members who surrounded her. When she died, it was them who performed the religious rites of showering the body and putting it into a coffin. They were present till she was buried."

"They are responsible for her death," he pressed.

Sultana was buried in a graveyard near her parents' home in Naogaon town on March 25.

Despite several attempts, The Daily Star could not reach Rab-5 Director Lt Col Riaz Shahriar over the phone.

Meanwhile, a Rab investigation team went to Naogaon town and talked to Sultana's son and one of her brothers-in-law. Both gave the team written statements regarding what they had learnt and experienced since her detention, Montu said.

## US storm death toll rises to 32

AFP, Washington

The death toll from weekend storms that raked across parts of the US South and Midwest has risen by three to 32, according to official counts, with more extreme weather forecast for yesterday and today.

Tennessee, one of the hardest-hit states since the storms unleashed tornadoes, fierce winds and flooding beginning Friday, earlier reported 12 weather-related fatalities Sunday and later raised that figure to 15.

Scenes of devastation were left in the path of the Tennessee tornado, which uprooted trees, flattened homes into piles of wooden boards and flipped vehicles.

## Inflation to determine

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Fund has called for excluding the pension scheme from the social safety budget as part of its \$4.7 billion loan programme.

Social safety net programme is meant for the poor people only, it said.

In that vein, the government is planning to increase the old age allowance by Tk 100 to Tk 600 in the incoming fiscal year.

At the same time, the government plans to increase the number of beneficiaries by one lakh to about 58 lakhs although the social welfare ministry has sought to expand the beneficiary count by 12 lakh. This will cost the government an additional Tk 761.42 crore, so the allocation for this programme will increase to Tk 4,305 crore.

The allowance for widowed, deserted and destitute women is proposed to increase by Tk 50 to Tk 550.

The finance division has recommended increasing the number of beneficiaries by one lakh to 25.75 lakh though the Social Welfare Ministry pushed to increase the tally by 6.9 lakh.

The government will have to spend Tk 216 crore more. The allocation for this programme in fiscal 2023-24 is

likely to be Tk 1,711.4 crore.

The number of disabled persons to get government handouts will increase by 5.35 lakh to 29 lakh.

Though the total amount of allowance is increased to Tk 2,978 crore from Tk 2,429 crore, the beneficiaries will receive the allowance at the current rate as the additional allocation will be spent for the extended coverage.

Right now, disabled persons get Tk 850 per month.

The social welfare ministry proposed to increase the allowance by Tk 1,000 crore.

No change is brought to the stipend for disabled students. The social welfare ministry proposed to increase the amount by Tk 300.

Finance ministry officials said decisions were not made on all programmes including those for freedom fighters and for improving the livelihoods of transgender, bedridden and disadvantaged community.

Besides the allowances, the government will spend more on open market sales and various employment generation programmes.

The government plans to increase allocation by Tk 5,000 to Tk 24,600 crore in the next fiscal for employment generation programmes.

## US House speaker to meet Taiwanese president in US

AFP, Washington

Republican US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy confirmed he would meet Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in California on Wednesday, defying dire warnings from China that he would be "playing with fire."

Tsai is stopping over in the United States en route to Central America, where she has met the leaders of Guatemala and is visiting Belize before meeting with McCarthy.

His office said yesterday the "bipartisan" meeting will take place at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, just outside Los Angeles.

China has warned the United States over Tsai's trip and in August carried out major military exercises around the island of Taiwan, a self-governing democracy it claims as part of its territory.

McCarthy, the top Republican in Congress who as House speaker is second in line to the presidency after the vice president, had earlier vowed to follow Democrat Nancy Pelosi, whom he succeeded as speaker, by traveling to Taiwan.