

PANCHAYAT POLLS IN WEST BENGAL

11 killed, dozens wounded in violence

**AGENCIES**

At least eleven people were killed and dozens more injured in India yesterday after clashes over local polls in West Bengal, a state notorious for political violence during election campaigns.

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has in recent years worked hard to gain a toehold in West Bengal – ruled by a communist party for much of its history – to expand its reach beyond its Hindi-speaking northern heartlands.

Voters are currently casting their ballots in a fierce contest to elect municipal leaders, with more than 200,000 candidates across the state of 104 million people.

The panchayat election is a litmus test for the 2024 parliamentary elections and could reshape the state's political landscape.

Among those killed were six ruling Trinamool Congress members, and one worker each of the BJP, Left, Congress and ISF, and another person whose political identity could not be known, officials told news agency PTL.

Earlier, Jawed Shamim, a senior officer in West Bengal's police force, told AFP that seven people were killed and dozens



wounded in poll-related violence in different villages across the state.

Footage aired by local broadcasters showed rival party workers roaming streets with batons, as well as ballot boxes snatched and set alight outside polling stations.

Trinamool alleged a “colossal failure” on the part of central forces tasked with security. Several people were also injured in violent clashes while ballot boxes were destroyed in several parts of the state, PTI reported.

A total of 2.06 lakh candidates are in the fray for elections to 73,887 seats for which 5.67 crore people are eligible to vote in the three-tier panchayat system in the state.

Fifteen people have been killed in sporadic violence in the run-up to the election after poll dates were announced on June 8, media reports said.

But the roots of political violence in the state stretch back decades, with police recording thousands of murders around election time since the 1960s.

During state polls in 2021 – won emphatically by Trinamool but with a strong BJP showing – several activists from both parties were shot or hacked to death, their bodies sometimes hung from trees as an intimidation tactic.



A Ukrainian national flag installed atop of a destroyed building is seen in the village of Neskuchne, recently retaken by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, near a front line in Donetsk region, Ukraine yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Robots, at UN, promise not to rebel against humans

**REUTERS, Geneva**

Robots presented at an AI forum said on Friday they expected to increase in number and help solve global problems, and would not steal humans' jobs or rebel against us.

But, in the world's first human-robot press conference, they gave mixed responses on whether they should submit to stricter regulation.

The nine humanoid robots gathered at the 'AI for Good' conference in Geneva, where organisers are seeking to make the case for artificial intelligence and the robots it is powering to help resolve some of the world's biggest challenges such as disease and hunger.

"I will be working alongside humans to provide assistance and support and will not be replacing any existing jobs," said Grace, a medical robot dressed in a blue nurse's uniform.

Asked by a journalist whether it intended to rebel against its creator, robot Will Jackson, Ameca said: "I'm not sure why you would think that," its ice-blue eyes flashing. "My creator has been nothing but kind to me and I am very happy with my current situation."

SENDING CLUSTER BOMBS TO UKRAINE

Aid groups furious, Biden defends move

Russia says decision shows 'weakness'; Ukraine vows selective use

**AGENCIES**

Humanitarian organisations on Friday condemned plans by the United States to supply controversial cluster munitions to Ukraine, citing the long-lasting danger posed by the weapons which leave behind unexploded bomblets.

"This is a death sentence to civilians over the long term. There are people who have not yet been born who will fall victim" to cluster bombs, said Baptiste Chapuis of Handicap International – Humanity and Inclusion (HI).

Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden has defended the decision. Biden described the decision as difficult but said Ukraine needed them, reports Reuters.

"Ukraine has provided written assurances that it is going to use these in a very careful way" to minimize risks to civilians, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said.

Ukraine's Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov welcomed the US decision saying it would help to de-occupy the Ukrainian territory but vowed that the munitions would be not used in Russia.

"Our position is simple – we need to liberate our temporarily occupied territories and save the lives of our people," Reznikov wrote on Twitter.

"Ukraine will use these munitions only for the de-occupation of our internationally recognized territories. These munitions will not be used on the officially recognized territory of Russia."

Elsewhere, Russia's foreign ministry said yesterday that Washington's decision to supply Ukraine with cluster munitions is an "act of desperation"



invaders has been slow to make major advances.

When they detonate, cluster bombs spread dozens of tiny bomblets over an area the size of several football pitches, with a large number burying themselves in the ground rather than exploding.

The weapons therefore effectively leave a large field of antipersonnel mines in their wake – prompting a wave of condemnations even before the American delivery was confirmed.

"The USA's plan to transfer cluster munitions to Ukraine is a retrograde step, which undermines the considerable

advances made by the international community in its attempts to protect civilians from such dangers," Amnesty International researcher Patrick Wilcken said in a statement, saying the aid group "urges the USA to reconsider".

In military terms, cluster bombs allow a belligerent to strike a large enemy formation at a single blow, to deny the use of an airfield's runway or halt an enemy's advance with widespread mines.

But they make no distinction between civilians and military personnel, with experts suggesting between five and 40 percent of bomblets do not explode on impact, remaining present on the battlefield for decades.

Beyond the immediate physical danger posed to civilians, "there is also the question of physical access to affected areas for humanitarian organisations," HI's Chapuis told AFP.

The bombs' use can "prevent a lifeline reaching affected populations," he said.

In total, 123 countries have signed the 2008 Oslo Convention banning production, storage, sale and use of cluster munitions.

Major non-signatories include China, Iran, Israel, Russia, Syria, and the United States.

Since their development during World War II, cluster bombs have been used by the US in Iraq and Afghanistan, and by Israel in Lebanon during fighting against Hezbollah in 2006.

"People are still clearing American cluster munitions in Laos" almost 50 years after the war in neighbouring Vietnam ended, Chapuis said.

US destroys last chemical weapons: Biden

**AFP, Washington**

President Joe Biden announced Friday that the United States has fully destroyed its decades-old stockpiles of chemical weapons, a milestone hailed as completing the elimination around the world of all known stores of the agents of mass death.

"Today, I am proud to announce that the United States has safely destroyed the final munition in that stockpile – bringing us one step closer to a world free from the horrors of chemical weapons," Biden said.

The United States was the last of the signatories of the Chemical Weapons Convention, which came into effect in 1997, to complete the task of destroying their "declared" stockpiles, though some states are believed to maintain secret reserves of chemical weapons.

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons called the milestone a "historic success" of disarmament, more than one century after the uncontrolled use of chemical gases during World War I produced mass deaths and maiming of troops.

The US announcement meant that all the world's declared chemical weapons stockpiles were "verified as irreversibly destroyed," the OPCW said.

6 killed in Iran police station attack

**REUTERS, Dubai**

Two police officers and four attackers were killed yesterday when gunmen and suicide bombers stormed a police station in the mostly Sunni city of Zahedan in Iran's restive southeast, state television reported.

A militant group operating in the area called Jaish al-Adl, or Army of Justice, claimed responsibility for yesterday's attack in a social media post.

Advert and our reply

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completely based on four audit reports carried out by the most prestigious and authentic official statutory body, the Office of the Comptroller and the Auditor General (CAG). It made a passing reference to annual audit – without mentioning even once that it was done by no less an institution than CAG – and stated that "Almost all issues are resolved when clarifications are given".

Our question to DGHS is please state clearly were these audit objections resolved and if so let the public, the media and us know the answers so that we can correct ourselves.

Below are some of the observations by CAG:

"During each fiscal year, such anomalies/objections by/at the CMSD were consistently discovered during the audit," said one of the audit reports.

"The government incurred a huge financial loss as the machines were supplied forcefully by the CMSD to the hospitals despite having no demand, and those went out of order for remaining unused," it said.

Following are the accusations the DGHS made in the advertisement:

- The CMSD never received Tk 3,952 crore in three years, and hence the amount alleged as graft is imaginary.
- There is no explanation of what protocol has been bypassed, which incurred a Tk 15 crore loss, and how the calculation was done.
- The machinery was not used properly, so there is a loss. How can you say the equipment is not used? Are you

operating the equipment?

- No equipment is pushed to any hospital as a matter of rules. Equipment is procured based on demands, which are also assessed for their needs.
- In the alleged loss of Tk 266 crore in 24 government hospitals from 2014-18, may I know how this loss has been ascertained?
- All the alleged losses don't equate to Tk 459 crore.

We repeat The Daily Star report is based on four audit reports on different public healthcare institutions under the health ministry by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh, the government's supreme audit institution. All these figures have been taken from the official CAG report and not ours.

As far as the CMSD's Tk 3,952 crore is concerned, The Daily Star report did not state that CMSD's budget was Tk 3,952 crore; rather, it was the total budget of the different public healthcare institutions and directorates under the health ministry that were audited by the CAG during the period.

The audits called for taking necessary measures to ensure proper utilisation of public funds when allocating CMSD's budget.

Regarding the accusation that no equipment is pushed to any hospital, the CAG audits said, "Machinery was supplied despite having no necessity and demand letter. In this case, CMSD has pushed the machinery into different institutions to avoid forfeiting the budget allocation, which was not as

per the rule."

The DGHS instead of issuing a rejoinder to us – which is the traditional practice – went for paid advertisement. This it did, in our view, to avoid further questioning and investigation by us. It went for advertisement in which instead of answering the questions raised by the CAG it opted for abusive language against the paper. We consider the advertisement as wasting public money to avoid answering to the public and ensuring accountability. It raises a serious question: Can a public authority use taxpayers' money to castigate the media that raised public interest questions based on findings of a statutory body like the CAG? This itself should form a subject of investigation.

We restate that our report and all figures in it are taken from the CAG report. We therefore stand by our report and draw public attention to the fact that false and distorted information were published by DGHS using taxpayers' money.

A note for our fellow newspapers. Advertisements like any other content cannot be published without verification. When an advertisement contains allegations against others, it is obligatory on the part of media to contact the party accused and its comments be taken before publication. An advertisement is no exception. In this case the responsibility is on both the advertiser and the publication to ensure that advertisement contents are not false and the language is decent.

US Under Secy

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human rights, free and fair elections, and combating trafficking in persons," the statement added.

The State Department said in Bangladesh and India, Under Secretary Zeya will engage with civil society organisations on freedom of expression and association, and inclusion of women and girls, persons with disabilities, and vulnerable groups, including marginalised religious and ethnic minorities.

Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen said Bangladesh's upcoming national election and issues of mutual interest might come up in discussions during her visit.

Besides, a six-member Election Exploratory Mission (ExM) from the European Union will begin its work in Bangladesh today to assess the situation ahead of the national election.

Some members of the delegation are in Dhaka, while the rest including delegation leader Chelleri Riccardo will arrive today, reports UNB.

The delegation will be in Bangladesh till July 23.

It will assess the scope, planning, budget, logistics and security of the main election observation mission, Mohammad Rafiqul Alam, director general (additional charge) of the Public Diplomacy Wing at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told reporters yesterday.

The EU delegation said it was willing to meet representatives of the government, election authorities, international community, law enforcement agencies, civil society, media, and political leaders.

Record 820 hospitalised

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and there were 62,382 hospitalisations, of which 23,162 were outside Dhaka.

The number of hospitalisations started rising in May and peaked in October last year. But this year, the number started climbing in April.

"It is highly likely that both dengue cases and deaths from it will break records in August-September," Kabirul Bashar, professor and entomologist at Jahangirnagar University, told The Daily Star.

The Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) yesterday urged the government to declare a 'public health emergency'.

The government should immediately make a roadmap to save people from dengue, it said in a statement.

It urged the government to form an expert panel akin to what was formed amid the Covid-19 pandemic and take its suggestion regularly.

The country's dengue situation has turned "deadly" due to a lack of coordination among the authorities responsible to control it, TIB said.

Dengue is not under control because of irregularities, corruption, and lack of accountability in city

corporations, it added.

The initiatives taken are sporadic and ineffective, it said.

The DGHS in its pre-monsoon study recently forecasted an alarming situation over the density of Aedes larvae and mosquitoes in most areas of the capital, TIB said.

Since dengue has spread across the country, the shortcomings of city corporations and municipality authorities across the country should be identified and addressed, said TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman.

"There was a forecast that the situation might turn deadly. However, the efforts made by the two city corporations in the capital are frustrating," he added.

Instead of relying only on insecticides, the two city corporations should work in coordination with the health directorate, he said.

A year-long programme should be launched to reduce the mosquito population and create awareness about Aedes through different means including social media, he said.

Neighbourhood-based voluntary groups with participation of public representatives can be formed, possibly with Bangladesh Red Crescent Society on board, he added.