

8 Canadian MPs ask Hasina to ensure free, fair polls

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Eight members of the Canadian parliament have written to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, expressing their deep desire to see free, fair, and peaceful elections in Bangladesh.

"In light of the upcoming elections, we urge you to continue developing your democratic tradition by ensuring that the electoral process is free, fair, and peaceful, involving all political parties in a transparent manner," said the letter issued on Wednesday.

Brad Redekopp, chair of the eight-member Canada-Bangladesh Parliamentary Friendship Group, tweeted the letter yesterday.

Recognising that this election will give millions of Bangladeshis the opportunity to express their choice of political party to govern Bangladesh, they provided a few expectations.

"We expect your government to protect freedom of expression and to protect dissenting voice. We expect diligent work to ensure voting irregularities such as voter intimidation, vote rigging, and ballot box stuffing are not allowed to occur," they said.

They also expected the current government to do everything it can to prevent violence, ensure the protection of all Bangladeshis regardless of their political affiliation, and promote active participation in the election by all eligible Bangladeshi citizens.

"A robust democracy thrives on the participation of diverse political ideologies and the fair representation of citizens' choices," the letter said.

By allowing all political parties to participate freely and ensuring that the political process is conducted without bias, Bangladesh can demonstrate its commitment to democracy and its respect for the will of the people, they said.

The eight Canadian MPs said Canada and Bangladesh enjoy a strong bilateral relationship, and it is their desire that the exchange of people and goods will grow further in the future.

Other members of the Canadian parliament who signed the letter include Salma Attaullahjan, Salma Zahid, Luc Desilets, Ken Haridie, Larry Brock, Robert Kitchen, and Kevin Waugh.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Gridlock on Airport Road near the Kakoli intersection around 10:30pm yesterday. Motorists and travellers suffered in standstill traffic for what many blamed was the spillover from a concert that was being held at the Bangladesh Army Stadium.

Israel targeting hospitals, schools

Over 11,000 killed in Gaza so far

REUTERS, Gaza

Israeli air strikes hit three Gaza hospitals and a school yesterday, killing at least 22 people, and a ground battle was under way at another hospital, Palestinian officials said, as Israel's forces took on Hamas in the heart of the enclave.

Officials said missiles landed in the courtyard of Gaza's biggest hospital, Al-Shifa, in the early hours, damaged the Indonesian Hospital and reportedly set fire to the Nasser Rantissi paediatric cancer hospital.

The hospitals are in northern Gaza, where Israel says the Hamas fighters who attacked it last month are concentrated, and are full of displaced people as well as patients and doctors. Israel says Hamas is using them as human shields, which the group denies.

Israeli tanks, which have been advancing through northern Gaza for almost two weeks, have taken up positions around

the Nasser Rantissi, Children's and Eye hospitals as well as the Al-Quds hospital, medical staff said earlier, raising the alarm.

"Israel is now launching a war on Gaza City hospitals," Mohammad Abu Selmeyah, director of Shifa hospital, which was struck by a missile early on Friday, told Reuters.

Gaza health ministry spokesman Ashraf Al-Qidra said Israel had bombed Shifa hospital buildings five times. "One Palestinian was killed and several were wounded in the early morning attack," he said by phone. Videos verified by Reuters showed scenes of panic and people covered in blood.

Selmeyah said later that at least 20 people were killed in Israeli strikes on Al-Buraq school in Gaza City, where people whose homes had been destroyed were sheltering.

The Palestinian Red Cross said Israeli forces were shooting at Al-Quds hospital, and there were violent clashes, with one

person killed and 28 wounded, most of them children.

Israel did not immediately comment on the reports. It says it does not aim its attacks at civilians and tries to protect them, but that Hamas fighters have hidden command centres and tunnels beneath Shifa and other hospitals.

"While the world sees neighbourhoods with schools, hospitals, scout groups, children's playgrounds and mosques, Hamas sees an opportunity to exploit," the Israeli military said. Hamas says such statements are untrue.

With Palestinian officials reporting more than 10,000 dead, Israel has faced growing calls for restraint in its month-old war on Hamas but says the fighters, whose Oct. 7 attack made all Israelis fear for their lives, would exploit a ceasefire.

The Israeli military said it struck more than 15,000 "terror targets" in the Gaza Strip and located 6,000 weapons since the beginning of the war.

11,000 sued

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newspaper yesterday that they were in fear of arrest.

"We demonstrated demanding wage hike of workers but were not involved in vandalism. A false case has been filed against me. I left Konabari area and have been staying elsewhere to avoid arrest," he said.

Another labour leader of Kashimpur area said he was not sued in any case. Yet he was in fear because police could put them in jail if they want.

The workers, who demonstrated, are now leaving are not staying in their homes, he said.

Following the clashes, over 160 factories were shuttered in Ashulia and Gazipur on Thursday.

Sarwar Hossain, general secretary of Garment Sramik Oiliya League, said they found hanging of closure notices in front of many factories in Ashulia yesterday. The notices say the factories were closed under section 13(1) of the labour law, which states "no work, no pay."

Over the last two weeks, workers demonstrating for a minimum wage of Tk 23,000 clashed with law enforcers in Gazipur, Savar, and the capital's Mirpur.

On October 30, garment worker Rasel Howlader, 26, died after Gazipur Industrial Police personnel allegedly shot him at close range, and on November 8, Anjara Khatun, 28, a sewing machine operator of Islam Garments in Gazipur, died of gunshot injuries after police opened fire on protesters.

'REVIEW WAGE HIKE'

Rejecting the new minimum wage of Tk 12,500 set by an RMG sector wage board, Mojuri Briddhite Garment Sramik Andolan, an alliance of 11 labour organisations, yesterday demanded at least Tk 25,000 per month.

At a rally in front of the Jatiya Press Club, they also demanded justice for three deceased workers, one of whom was found dead after a factory fire.

They said when the garment workers have been demanding better pay, the incident of attacks on them in Gazipur and Ashulia was shameful.

Taslima Akhtar, the coordinator of the alliance, said the workers are being threatened with closure of factories, laying off, and recruitment halt.

Workers must be given wages on which they can survive. There is no room to ignore this justified demand, she said.

"The wage board says 56 percent pay has been increased. But if we look at the annual increment, it stands at 39 percent. If we see the inflation, prices of commodities, it is not possible for the workers to survive with Tk 12,500."

At another rally in front of the capital's National Museum yesterday, Karmojibi Nari, a non-government organisation, said they don't want a wage board that does not work for the workers.

Tk 940cr lost due to poor upkeep

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total budget for the 2018 national elections.

Meanwhile, another 40,000 EVMs are at the risk of breaking down as they have been kept in places that are not designed for the upkeep of such sophisticated machinery. This means, another Tk 940 crore will likely go to waste if these EVMs are not properly stored and refurbished soon.

Presently, only around 25 of the 120 democratic countries, including Bhutan, India, Brazil and Venezuela, employ electronic voting machines. Many nations, including Germany, the Netherlands and the United States, have banned the use of EVMs over concerns about security, accuracy, dependability, and verifiability of E-voting.

But the countries that use EVMs, including India and Brazil, have clear and detailed guidelines on their storage and movement.

"When compared to the other countries that use EVMs, it is unprecedented that so many machines have gone out of order. A large amount of public money has been wasted," said election expert Abdul Alim.

A BIG LOSS

The EC began stocktaking and reviewing the EVMs in August 2022, after deciding to use EVMs in 150 constituencies in the January 2024 election.

At the time, EC officials said they had enough EVMs to cover 70-80 constituencies and that they would need to procure more machines if they were to use voting machines in 150 seats.

But in January, the government rejected an EC project worth Tk 8.71 crore for the purchase of 2 lakh new EVMs and construction of 10 facilities to store them.

In mid-February, Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory (BMTF), the lone manufacturer of the EVMs used by the Commission, in a proposal said 40,000 of those machines were beyond repair and the rest 1.1 lakh can be fixed at a cost of around Tk 1,260 crore, said a top EC secretariat official.

However, the Planning Commission rejected the proposal, citing "the government's financial capacity" in the current global context.

"They [BMTF] sought the money to refurbish the EVMs to make them usable. Meaning, they need to change batteries, cables, timers and some other parts," EC Additional Secretary Ashok Kumar Debnath told The Daily Star.

According to a presentation delivered at an internal EC session

in early September, 93,000 EVMs were stored at the EC's field offices and schoolrooms at the district and upazila levels across the country.

"Information from the EC offices indicates that 30% of these machines are currently inoperable," reads the presentation obtained by this newspaper.

"The lifespan of EVMs is decreasing due to a lack of maintenance. A large

and windows, and must be protected against dampness and flooding. The storage facilities also should have exhaust fans for proper air circulation. But many of the rented warehouses and schools and colleges where the EVMs are stored lack such a protected environment.

This is why over 30% of the EVMs have become non-functional in such a short time, the officials add, requesting anonymity.

According to EC officials, 39 monitors, 10 monitor batteries, and as many control units got stolen from Brahmanbaria's Kashba upazila parishad auditorium and a primary school in Jhenaidah last year. They were kept there following a local government election. Many of these machinery and equipment were eventually retrieved by police.

Another 50 EVMs became inoperable in May after water used to extinguish a fire at the Kashiani Upazila Election Office in Gopalganj seeped into the EVMs.

According to a district election officer in Rangpur, most of the 900-1,000 EVMs stored in upazila election offices and educational institutions have gotten out of order.

Multiple EC officials said the issue of proper storage facility and maintenance system did not get proper attention before procuring the EVMs in 2018, which is a failure at the planning level.

A former election commissioner also confirmed that they procured the EVMs without any provisions or guidelines for their preservation.

In March, the EC issued a tender to rent houses in 64 districts to store the machines, but they were able to find such houses in 38 districts.

According to a district officer in Chattogram, owners do not want to rent their homes to government organisations since they cannot increase rent frequently.

Former election commissioners Rafiqul Islam and Brig Gen (ret'd) Shahadat Hossain Chowdhury said they proposed vertical expansion of the EC office at field level and renting of warehouse in places where there is no EC office to store the EVMs in a proper environment, but it did not happen.

EVM Project Director Col Syed Raquibul Hasan said their project has already got an extension for a year until June 2024, without any cost increase.

"The Election Commission is working to prepare a guideline for the preservation of EVMs. We are also sending the EVMs that are failing quality checks to the Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory," he said.

TIMELINE

- 2011: Budget-made EVMs were used in one ward in Chattogram city polls
- 2017: EVM used in several polling centres in Rangpur city polls
- 2018: EVM used in six constituencies in national elections
- 2013: Use of EVM was suspended due to glitch in Rajshahi city polls
- 2022: First local elections held using EVMs in all centres

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number of machines have damaged. Various parts of some of the machines are even missing," it continued.

Another presentation at the same programme said that of the 1.5 lakh machines, 93,000 are stored at EC's field offices and schools, 54,500 at Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory (BMTF), and 2,500 at the EC office's basement in the capital's Agargaon.

A top EC official said they completed a quality check of all the 93,000 EVMs stored at the field level a few months ago, and a large number of them did not pass the test.

EVM Project Director Col Syed Raquibul Hasan acknowledged that there is no proper storage facility for preserving the EVMs.

"In many cases, monitors and timers got broken, cables lost, and fingerprint-matching components and ballot unit buttons got damaged. The machines were kept in damp places," he told The Daily Star.

WHO TO BLAME

EC officials say the warehouses to store EVMs should have sealed doors

2.10 lakh yaba pills recovered in Teknaf

UNB, Cox's Bazar

Members of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) yesterday recovered 2.10 lakh pieces of contraband yaba tablets from Teknaf upazila of Cox's Bazar along the Myanmar border.

Two teams of the frontier force jointly conducted a drive in Alugola area along Nazirpara border under Teknaf upazila early in the morning on tip-off that a shipment of yaba would be smuggled into Bangladesh from Myanmar, said a media release.

Sensing the presence of Bangladeshi border force, three people fled to a forest leaving 3 bags behind, it reads.

Later, 2, 10,000 pieces of yaba were recovered from four bags, according to the release.

Though the BGB personnel continued drives in the forest to nab the suspected drug peddlers till 9:30am, no one was detained in this connection, it added.

Tourist boat set on fire in Rangamati

STAR REPORT

Unidentified miscreants torched a tourist boat on Kaptai Lake in Rangamati yesterday.

No one was injured in the incident, our Rangamati correspondent reports quoting the boatman of the tourist boat and police.

The attack came as the boat was heading towards the Shuvolung Waterfalls with six tourists, said boatman Md Gias Uddin.

According to Gias, around 10:00am, a group of armed people intercepted the boat when it reached the Kander Mukh area. They forced the tourists and the boatman to get off the boat and set it on fire using petrol.

Confirming the incident, Ariful Amin, officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station, said they have launched an investigation.

FACTIONAL CLASH IN BOGURA

6 BCL men suspended

UNB, Bogura

Bangladesh Chhatra League yesterday suspended six leaders and activists of its Bogura district unit following a factional clash between two groups at Government Azizul Haque College on Thursday.

The suspended are Bogura district BCL Vice-President Touhidur Rahman Towhid, Joint General Secretary Mahfuzur Rahman, Organising Secretary Al Imran Hossain, Government Azizul Haque College unit activists Sadekul Islam Shuvo, Jobair Sardar Sibah and Mohan Sardar.

At least 13 BCL men were injured in a clash during an anti-blockade programme on the college campus on Thursday morning.

Tigers look to end on a high

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discussed previous game provided some morale boost for the Tigers whose campaign concludes as they face Australia at the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Pune today, with the objective of finishing among top eight teams in the tournament to ensure entry in the 2025 Champions Trophy.

As things stand, Bangladesh – level on four points with England, Sri Lanka, and the Netherlands – face a simple calculation: a win over Australia all but keeps their Champions Trophy fate in their own hands.

But even if Bangladesh lose to the five-time World Champions, the Tigers have a good chance of making it through on net run-rate, provided the Netherlands fail to cause an upset against India – which would render the outcome of the England-Pakistan match non-threatening for Bangladesh.

What Bangladesh cannot afford is a crushing defeat, which could put Sri Lanka – who already played all nine matches – ahead of them on net run-rate.

Hypothetically, if Australia bat first and score 300 runs, Bangladesh must score at least 126 runs to qualify, and if Bangladesh bat first and are dismissed for 200 runs, they must ensure Australia take more than 22 overs to chase down the target.

The surface in Pune is projected to remain sporty, and because it is a day game, the dew effect is already out of the equation. However, the city saw a heavy downpour for more than an hour the day before which could result in the pitch providing a bit more assistance to the bowlers early in the game today.

Bangladesh, meanwhile, have an additional challenge as they are without regular skipper Shakib Al Hasan, who was ruled out due to a finger injury sustained during the previous game against Sri Lanka.

In Shakib's absence, head coach Chandika Hathurusingha hinted that they will incorporate an extra bowling option. Sources say there is a good possibility that a spinner in the form of Nasum Ahmed or Mahedi Hasan may be included in the playing eleven today.

"Yes, always safe. We were actually spoiled. We had him [Shakib Al Hasan] for a long, long time; and I mean when you have someone like Shakib's calibre, number one all-rounder, it's two players in one, so it's hard to do much with the combination," Hathurusingha said in the pre-match presser yesterday.

"So, we will definitely want to fill his bowling vacuum with another spinner or a fast bowler. It's his batting we're going to miss and his leadership. So, it's hard."

With the exception of a win in Cardiff in 2005, Bangladesh could not

beat Australia in 21 ODIs. The type of form Pat Cummins and his troops are currently enjoying following six consecutive wins, and especially after how Glenn Maxwell conjured a victory out of nowhere in their previous game, the Tigers are set for an uphill task.

However, since Australia have already confirmed a place in the semifinals, they may opt to test their bench strength and rest some of the regulars.

Can Bangladesh snatch a victory to end their dismal World Cup campaign on a somewhat positive note, equaling their highest-win tally in a single World Cup edition?

Rassie guides

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South Africa opener Quinton de Kock set up the chase of 244 scored by Afghanistan with a breezy 41 that took him to the top of the tournament's scoring charts on 591 runs.

Rassie van der Dussen (76 not out) then guided the Proteas home, stitching together a 65-run partnership with Andile Phehlukwayo, who smashed the winning runs with a massive six over deep mid-wicket in the 48th over.

Earlier, were bowled out for 244. Afghanistan slipped to 116-6 before Azmatullah Omarzai hit an unbeaten 97 for a competitive total but not enough for the huge victory margin that the team required.

Gerald Coetzee took four wickets while spinner Keshav Maharaj returned impressive figures of 2-25 as the Proteas tune-up for their semi-final clash with five-time winners Australia next week.

Quinton de Kock played a key part with his six wicketkeeping dismissals to equal a World Cup record of Australia's Adam Gilchrist and Pakistan's Sarfaraz Ahmed.

Openers Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Ibrahimi Zadrani started aggressively before Maharaj struck with his first ball to have Gurbaz caught out for 25.

Coetzee sent back Ibrahimi in the next over to check the batting surge and Afghanistan slipped from 41-0 to 45-3 when Maharaj had skipper Hashmatullah Shahidi caught behind for two.

Rahmat Shah attempted to rebuild in a 49-run stand with Azmatullah but fell to fast bowler Lungi Ngidi for 26.

Afghanistan lost two more wickets to be in danger of getting bowled out in less than their quota of 50 overs but Azmatullah stood firm to play out the innings.

He put on key stand with Rashid Khan (14) and then Noor Ahmad (26) to thwart the opposition bowling.

Azmatullah, 23, hit his ODI best but missed out on a ton after he just managed a single run in the final over that ended with a run out.