

US wants to see violence-free election in Bangladesh

Says US state dept

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Washington has reiterated that the election in Bangladesh should be non-violent, which is a component of a free and fair election.

"So, you have heard me say consistently from this podium that we want to see free and fair elections held in Bangladesh, and one of the components of a free and fair election is that that election be conducted without violence," said US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller at a regular briefing in Washington DC yesterday.

He made the statement when asked whether the US considers the arson attacks on buses and trucks, displacement of rail tracks, petrol-bombing train coaches during the blockades, and burning of people alive to undermine the prelude to free and fair polls in Bangladesh.

The opposition BNP has been enforcing blockades and strikes since the violence centring their October 28 rally in Dhaka, demanding the installation of a caretaker government for a free and fair election. The ruling Awami League says the elections will be held under the current government, as per the constitution.



A Palestinian woman laments while holding the body of a baby at Nasser hospital in Khan Yunis, in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday. Since October 7, Israeli forces have killed almost 19,000 people, mostly women and children, in Gaza.

PHOTO: AFP

Battles that quickened victory

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Drawing upon extensive research from books and documents on the Liberation War and interviews with war veterans and researchers, The Daily Star identified six such battles that fundamentally reshaped the course of the war in the final days of the nine-month bloody war.

SECOND BATTLE OF BELONIA

This battle marked the first surrender of Pakistani forces to Mukti Bahini, according to the book "Feni-Belonia Ronnogonee Ak Prantor".

The battlefield stretched across Parshuram, Fulgazi and Chhaglaiya upazilas of Feni, witnessing intense fighting from November 5- November 10 and strengthening Mukti Bahini's momentum while weakening the Pakistani hold.

On the night of November 5, after a Karthik rain, darkness and silence descended on the land. Under the cloak of night, freedom fighters led by Major Zafar Imam (later lieutenant colonel) of the 10th East Bengal Regiment, crossed into Bangladesh from India.

Moving with stealth and precision, they surrounded a vast area of Belonia bordering India on three sides. Before dawn, the freedom fighters had already established their positions and dug trenches throughout the night, ready for the challenge ahead. Unaware of the trap, the Pakistani forces were oblivious to the danger lurking in the shadows.

On November 6, a fierce battle erupted in the morning as freedom fighters besieged the Pakistan army in Belonia. For three gruelling days, the outnumbered freedom fighters fought hard.

On November 9, desperate Pakistani forces called in airstrikes with four Sabre jets in an attempt to break the siege. However, their efforts fell short when Mukti Bahini brought down one of the Sabre jets with machine gun fire. Faced with unrelenting resistance, the Pakistani troops surrendered on the night of November 10.

"Winning the battle of Belonia changed the course of the war as its location held immense military value. The immediate aftermath of this victory instilled a sense of confidence across the country, fuelling the flames of resistance. Even today, the tactical brilliance employed in the Belonia campaign continues to be taught in military academies worldwide," Lt Col (retd) Zafar Imam Bir Bikram, the commander of the 10th East Bengal Regiment

group of Razakars.

Despite the odds, on the night of November 12, a single platoon of freedom fighters led by Abdur Rouf launched an ambush on the enemy.

In a two-hour battle, they engaged with Pak soldiers and Razakars guarding the terminal. Rouf and his team eventually overcame the enemy defence and seized control of the ferry terminal.

They immediately proceeded to their next objective: destroying the

This route had to be taken for the Mukti Bahini and Mitro Bahini (joint forces) to liberate Sylhet.

In the third week of November, the 1st East Bengal Regiment, having liberated Atgram and Zakiganj, reached Gaupur on November 22.

However, their progress was met with fierce resistance. Alpha Company of the 31st Punjab Regiment ambushed Alpha and Bravo Companies of the 1st East Bengal Regiment, inflicting heavy damage.

On November 26, Second Lieutenant Waqar Hassan, platoon commander of the Delta Company of the 1st East Bengal Regiment, led his team in a counteroffensive. Despite facing heavy casualties, Waqar rallied his remaining forces and turned the tide of the battle.

His courage and tactical skill resulted in the surrender of 26 Pakistani soldiers and the deaths of 88 others, including their commander Major Sarwar.

"If we hadn't won that battle, capturing Kanaighat would have been impossible, and consequently, the battle of Sylhet wouldn't have been ours," Major Waqar Hasan Bir Pratik told The Daily Star.

"The courage displayed by a single platoon of freedom fighters against the formidable 31st Punjab Regiment that night was truly exceptional," he said.

OPERATION NUT CRACK

The battle to capture Akhaura, codenamed Operation Nut Crack, was fought between November 30 and December 5 in Brahmanbaria. Victory in this battle paved the way for the liberation of the capital, Dhaka, and ultimately of the nation.

According to the largest collection of Liberation War documents, "Bangladesh Swadhinota Juddho: Dolip Potro (Volume 10)", the control of Akhaura, a crucial railway junction, would allow Mukti Bahini to sever communication and supply lines for the Pakistani army, compromising their operation capabilities in Chittagong and Sylhet.

On November 30, the 2nd East Bengal Regiment launched an ambush on the enemy soldiers in Akhaura. Supported by the Indian 10th Bihar Regiment, they successfully captured the western parts of the town.

Following their initial success, the 2nd East Bengal Regiment embarked on the second phase of their offensive. On the night of December 1, they launched a raid on the Pakistani forces at Singerbil railway station base.

The attack was met with fierce resistance from the Pak army, leading to a brutal exchange of fire and heavy losses on both sides. The fighting continued throughout the night and into the early hours of December 2.

Initially, the Pak forces were forced to retreat, but they soon regrouped and launched a counteroffensive. This action ignited another intense battle that lasted until 5:00am.

Despite the initial setback, the 2nd East Bengal Regiment launched a counterstrike of their own. This relentless push led to the capture of the adjacent Azampur railway station on December 3.

On December 4, two Indian brigades joined forces with the freedom fighters, further bolstering their strength. The combined force surrounded the Pakistani troops in Kanaighat and Darbast, strategic towns connected by a single road.

December 5.

After six days of combat, the Pak army, facing odds and dwindling supplies, was finally forced to surrender along with four of their brigades.

"Through this relentless week-long campaign, we significantly weakened the Pakistani army. It was a pivotal moment in the war, and after this victory, the liberation of Dhaka was inevitable. We effectively disrupted their logistical support for troops stationed in Chittagong and Sylhet," Dr Md Aminul Hasan, the commander of Alpha Company during Operation Nut Crack, told this newspaper.

OPERATION KILO FLIGHT

While ground forces made significant contributions to the war, the role of the air wing cannot be underestimated. Operation Kilo Flight is the code name for all aerial operations launched by Mukti Bahini during Operation Hotpant.

Conducted from the second week of November to the second week of December, this campaign further solidified the dominance of the Mukti Bahini at sea.

Following Operation Jackpot, the naval fighters, despite numerous small operations utilising limpet mines and small explosives, faced limitations in launching large-scale attacks. This led Jalal Uddin, adviser of Operation Jackpot, to recognise the need for gunboats to bolster Mukti Bahini's naval capabilities.

Responding to his request, the Calcutta Port Trust provided two decommissioned patrol boats to the liberation army's naval unit. These boats underwent extensive modifications and were transformed into gunboats, and were renamed "BNS Padma" and "BNS Palash".

On November 10, Operation Hotpant officially commenced with the deployment of these two gunboats. Their initial mission was to lay mines at the entrance of Mongla Port, a crucial logistical hub for the Pakistani army.

Following the success of the mine-laying operation, the naval fighters intercepted a British ship, the "City of St Albans," on November 11. This vessel, carrying a massive cargo of 10,000 tonnes of food, supplies, and weapons destined for Mongla from Karachi, was forced to turn back, denying the Pakistani forces necessary resources.

On the same day, the Pakistani gunboat "Tofail" was sunk by a mine explosion in the Zulfiqar Channel, resulting in the deaths of 35 soldiers.

Throughout the last week of November, five foreign ships attempting to deliver supplies to the Pak forces were damaged by hidden mines.

On December 10, following a series of operations, Mukti Bahini naval fighters achieved a major victory by capturing the strategically important Mongla Port. This cut off a vital supply line for the Pakistani forces and dealt a significant blow to their operations in the south-western region.

Lt Cdr Jalal Uddin Bir Uttam, a key member of both Operation Hotpant and its predecessor, Operation Jackpot, reflected on the significance of the naval campaign while speaking to The Daily Star.

"The British ship we intercepted on November 11 carried 2,000 tonnes of heavy weapons. Had this shipment reached Mongla unhindered, the war would have been prolonged. Furthermore, the damage inflicted on several foreign vessels disrupted the entire maritime movement, severing the Pakistani army's supply chain in the southwest. By the time we captured Mongla Port on December 10, their defeat was all but inevitable," he said.

6 die in road crashes

STAR REPORT

At least six people died in road accidents in three districts yesterday.

In Jamalpur Sadar upazila, three people were killed and six injured in a three-way road collision involving a bus, a CNG-run auto rickshaw and a human haulier in Titpalla bus stand area.

The deceased are vegetable traders -- Anowar Hossain, 40; Shamsul Hossain, 52 -- and human haulier driver Soja Mia, said OC Mohabbat Kabir of Jamalpur Sadar Police Station.

In Mymensingh, two people, including the driver of an auto rickshaw, were killed, while three others were injured in a road crash on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway in Trishal upazila.

The victims are Mofazzol Hossain, 28, and Habibur Rahman, 35.

In Thakurgaon, a motorcyclist was killed when he hit a roadside tree on the Thakurgaon-Baliadangi road near Bhalajon Bazar around 3:00pm. Ejab Uddin Lablu, 50, was a teacher at Bhalajon Ansaria Faizal Madrasa from Fakirpara village in Baliadangi upazila, said OC Firoz Wahid of Thakurgaon Police Station.

Elderly man found dead

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayanganj

A man was found dead in his rented flat in Chitashal Nurbag area of Narayanganj's Fatullah upazila, where he had been living with his only son since his wife died five months ago.

Abdur Razzak, 50, a mason by trade, was discovered dead yesterday with his hands and feet tied by his son, Md Akash, 22, who had returned home in the morning from spending the night at a friend's house.

The victim had injury marks on his head; police initially believed it to be murder, said Nure Azam, officer-in-charge of Fatullah Police Station.

IMF

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greater exchange rate flexibility, the IMF report said.

The underperformance has been partly external-driven, amidst aggressive global monetary tightening and the larger-than-expected spillovers into Bangladesh, it added.

Bangladesh, however, did not need a waiver from the board of the IMF.

The targets that were met are related to the budget deficit, external payments arrears, reserve money, social spending, and capital investments by the government.

Speaking at a virtual media briefing at the IMF headquarters in Washington, Rahul Anand, mission chief for Bangladesh of the lender, said in response to shocks, the government has taken several measures to deal with macroeconomic challenges.

Bangladesh Bank has tightened monetary policy, allowed greater exchange rate flexibility, and unified the multiple exchange rates. The authorities also kept the fiscal primary balance within the programme target.

"Thanks to these efforts by the authorities, and despite the difficult macroeconomic environment, the overall programme performance has been broadly satisfactory. I am happy to report that most programme targets and reform commitments were met," he said.

He urged Bangladesh to focus on containing inflation and rebuilding external resilience in the near term in order to tackle the current macroeconomic volatility and the balance of payments crisis.

In a letter to the IMF dated November 21, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal said the financing need for BOP increased further due to an unprecedented reversal in the financial account, which has impeded the government's efforts to restore foreign exchange reserves.

In addition, elevated global commodity prices and continued depreciation of the taka have kept inflation persistently high, placing a disproportionate burden on the poor, he said.

The minister said the updated programme will continue to be centred on upfront policy actions aimed at restoring macroeconomic stability and rebuilding the reserve buffer.

The next review of the 42-month programme will take place in May when Bangladesh is expected to receive the third installment from the IMF.

280 aspirants

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The EC stuck to its decision of cancelling the candidature of AI's Cox's Bazar-1 nominee Salahuddin Ahmed.

Barishal-4 AI nominee Shammi Ahmed lost her appeal to get back the candidacy because of her dual citizenship.

She also lost her appeal challenging the candidacy of independent runner and incumbent MP Pankaj Nath.

Shahjahan Omar, the BNP leader who recently jumped ship and won the AI nomination for Jhalakathi-1, will be able to run for parliament.

AI leader and independent runner Mumiruzzaman Munir objected to his eligibility, saying that Omar concealed information about cases in his affidavit.

AI nominees Sajjadul Hasan of Netrakona-4 and Mohibul Hasan Chowdhury of Chattogram-9 will be in the race.