

3 polls campaign offices set on fire in two districts

Four arrested over pre-election violence

STAR REPORT

Four people were arrested for their suspected involvement in incidents of pre-polls violence in Bogura, Netrakona, and Jhenidah between Sunday night and yesterday.

Meanwhile, three election camps were torched in Shariatpur and Cox's Bazar yesterday. However, no arrests were made over those incidents.

In Bogura-1, an Awami League leader allegedly assaulted a supporter of KSM Mostafizur Rahman, an independent candidate, in Sonatala upazila yesterday.

Police arrested Rafiqul Islam Matin, 39, general secretary of AL's Zorgacha union unit.

In Netrakona-1, a former union parishad chairman allegedly led an attack on supporters of independent candidate Jannatul Ferdous Ara Jhuma Talukder yesterday.

Police arrested Abdul Quddus, former chairman of Nazirpur union parishad and also a supporter of AL candidate Mustaque Ahmed Rumi.

In Jhenidah-4, two supporters of AL candidate Anwarul Azim allegedly obstructed the election campaign of independent candidate Abdur Rashid Khokon on Sunday night.

After police arrested Dulu Mandal, 32, and Jamir Hossain, 40, Anwarul said his supporters didn't obstruct anyone's campaign.

In Shariatpur-2, two election camps were torched in Naria upazila yesterday.

Of the camps, one was of AL candidate AKM Enamul Haque Shamim in the Ahmदनagar Bazar area, and the other was of independent candidate Khaled Shawkat Ali in Tripolli village.

The camps blamed each other for the arson attack. Police are investigating the incidents, said Naria Police Station OC Mostafizur Rahman.

In Cox's Bazar-1, election camp of Kalyan Party Candidate Syed Md Ibrahim was torched in the Khojakhali area under Chakaria upazila yesterday.

Police are trying to trace the criminals, said Sheikh Mohammad Ali, OC of Chakaria Police Station.



The Kalabagan Krira Chakra ground in Dhaka's Dhanmondi is full to the brim during a campaign rally of the Awami League yesterday. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, also the AL president, addressed the rally as the chief guest.

PHOTO: BSS

BNP, Amnesty condemn sentencing of Prof Yunus

Foreign secy says judgment unlikely to harm Dhaka-Washington ties

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Condemning the sentencing of Nobel laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus in a labour law violation case, the BNP yesterday said the entire nation was "ashamed of this judgment dictated by the Gono Bhaban".

Speaking at a virtual press briefing, BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said the Nobel laureate was subjected to vengeance of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

He said Prof Yunus was sentenced to six months' jail in a so-called case over violation of the labour law.

The BNP leader said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's continued "venomous remarks" against Prof Yunus and different threats to him have proved that this judgment has been delivered "out of

political vengeance".

"She also threatened to drop Dr Muhammad Yunus off the Padma Bridge into the river. Since then, it became clear that a deep-rooted conspiracy was on against Dr Muhammad Yunus."

He said though the Awami League leaders are plundering and siphoning off lakhs of crores of taka abroad, no action is taken against them.

'A BLATANT ABUSE OF JUSTICE SYSTEM'

Amnesty International yesterday said the conviction of Prof Yunus is an "abuse of the justice system to settle political vendetta".

"Amnesty International believes that initiating criminal proceedings against Muhammad Yunus and his colleagues for issues that belong to the civil and administrative arena is a blatant abuse of

labour laws and the justice system and a form of political retaliation for his work and dissent," read a statement published by the organisation on its X handle, formerly known as Twitter.

The conviction of Prof Yunus showcases the difficult situation of human rights in Bangladesh, where the authorities have eroded freedoms and bulldozed critics into submission, it said.

The unusual speed at which the trial was completed stands in stark contrast to the snail paced progress in other labour rights-related court cases in Bangladesh, the human rights watchdog said.

Meanwhile, Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen has said the sentencing of Prof Yunus is unlikely to affect the US-Bangladesh relations.

"The issue of an individual cannot affect

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DHAKA-COX'S BAZAR ROUTE

New train to start operating Jan 10

UNB, Dhaka

A new non-stop intercity train "Parjatan Express" will start operating on the Dhaka-Cox's Bazar route starting January 10, Bangladesh Railway announced yesterday.

Departing from Dhaka at 6:15am and reaching Cox's Bazar at 3:00pm, the train will return from Cox's Bazar at 8:00pm, arriving in Dhaka at 4:30am.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has approved the name, and the train will feature coaches newly imported from Korea.

Covering a distance of 346 kilometres, the fares for the new trains remain consistent with the existing rates.

The first train on the route, Cox's Bazar Express, started operating on December 1.

Ex-FCCI president, wife sued for illegal wealth

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

The Anti Corruption Commission (ACC) yesterday sued Siddiqur Rahman, former president of the Faridpur Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FCCI), and his wife, Musreen Akhtar.

ACC's Deputy Director, Rezaul Karim, filed two separate cases in the Faridpur ACC office, accusing the couple of accumulating approximately Tk 13.90 crore illegally beyond their known sources of income.

According to the case statements, Siddiqur, 45, illegally acquired Tk 11.54 crore between the tax years 1996-97 and 2021-22, while Musreen, 45, is accused of having Tk 2.35 crore derived from her husband's illicit wealth between the tax years 2012-13 and 2021-22.

Lawyer's aide found dead

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

A man was found dead at a paddy field in Chunarughat upazila of Habiganj yesterday morning.

Harun Mia, 40, of the upazila's Ranigaon union, was a lawyer's assistant and worked at the district court, said Hillol Roy, officer-in-charge (OC) of Chunarughat Police Station.

"His throat had been slit and his limbs were bound."

Police recovered Harun's body from a paddy field next to Chunarughat New Market.

The body was sent to the Habiganj Sadar Hospital morgue for autopsy, the OC said, adding that the incident was being investigated as a murder.

Prof Yunus sentenced to 6 months' jail

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"This verdict against me is contrary to all legal precedent and logic. I call for the Bangladeshi people to speak in one voice against injustice and in favour of democracy and human rights for each and every one of our citizens," Reuters quoted him as saying in a statement after the verdict.

Defence counsel Barrister Abdullah-Al-Mamun told The Daily Star the judgement has been delivered in a hurried manner to blemish the image of Dr Yunus nationally and internationally.

"No offence has been committed in the eyes of the law, but they have been handed over the punishment," he said.

State counsel Khurshid Alam Khan said Yunus and the three other Grameen Telecom officials have been convicted as they appointed employees on contractual basis and did not provide them the due benefits. The company also did not regularise their job in accordance with the rules of the Labour Act, 2006.

According to the case documents, Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) officials inspected the Grameen Telecom office in the capital's Mirpur on August 16, 2021, and found several violations of labour laws there.

Three days later, the department sent a letter to the Telecom, saying the company did not regularise the job of 67 of its employees although the company should have done so.

Besides, the company did not set up the employees' participation and welfare funds and did not pay the mandatory 5 percent of the company's dividends to the workers, the case statement said.

On September 9, 2021, Labour Inspector (General) SM Arifuzzaman filed the case against Yunus and the three others, rather than against the company.

During cross examination, DIFE Inspector Md Tarikul Islam, the first prosecution witness, admitted that although his complaint was against the company, he did not press charges against the company.

He added that he named only four in the case out of the 12 or 13 people listed in various positions in the company's Article of Memorandum.

Yunus's defence maintained that he is a non-executive chairman of

the company, and is not "actively involved in the conduct of the business".

The prosecution witnesses agreed that no document was submitted proving that Yunus made decisions about daily operations of the company, the defence said.

The defence also mentioned that Grameen Telecom has no provisions for any permanent job structure because it works on contractual basis with Nokia Phone and so

well as other benefits like regular employees, it said.

In their case, the DIFE said a Workers Participation Fund and Welfare Fund had not been constituted as per section 234 of the labour law and 5 percent of the net profit had not been paid to these two funds and to the fund constituted by the Bangladesh Sramik (Labourer) Kalyan Foundation Law.

"Dr Yunus has created 50 social enterprises like Grameen Telecom.

a lawsuit with the High Court. During that process, the Telecom settled out of court with them and gave Tk 437 crore to 156 employees in five percent profits made over 12 years.

On May 23, 2023, the HC acknowledged the settlement and disposed of the case.

The prosecution witnesses said they did not know if the Telecom had ever been ordered to pay a fine to rectify.



"It's a travesty of justice to charge Prof Yunus in this way. The legal system is being weaponised to harass him. There are many cases of labour law violations in this country; there are many businessmen who are exploiting workers on which the government has done nothing. For the govt to prosecute Prof Yunus on these charges seems to be frivolous and disproportionate."

IRENE KHAN
UN Special Rapporteur for freedom of expression and former secretary general of Amnesty International

their employees are appointed contractually. Their contracts are renewed only after the renewal of the company's agreement with Nokia Phone.

However, the employees of the company are receiving provident fund, gratuity and earned leave as



"Outraged and deeply disturbed at the Yunus verdict particularly so because of the utter credibility crisis of the judicial case. Is justice being dispensed or vendetta and intolerance?"

HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN
Executive chairman of Power and Participation Research Centre

He has no shares in any of these. He does not get any dividends from these companies," the defence argued, pointing out that since he does not profit, there is no question of sharing it.

The defence also held that the Telecom is a not-for-profit, and any profit it makes is absorbed back into the company.

While Yunus was sentenced to prison for this, Grameen Telecom had actually settled out of court with their employees in this regard in the past.

A statement sent by the company last September said that the company's employees had filed



"Yunus was granted 'immediate bail pending appeals'. Shocking. The British didn't harass Tagore though he renounced the knighthood and wrote a seditious book Letters from Russia. Amartya Sen is harassed now in India. What's wrong with us? Leave our only noble laureates alone."

BINAYAK SEN
Director general of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies

The court framed charges in the case on June 6 last year.

Human rights activist and Supreme Court lawyer Barrister Sarah Hossain told reporters that how fast the trial proceedings have been finished and the judgement delivered is unprecedented.

Recording of depositions in the case ran till 8:00pm on one occasion, she said.

The judge did not read out the whole judgement in the open court which is unusual, she added.

Jatiyo Party

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However, their names will be on the ballots as the deadline for withdrawal of nomination papers expired on December 17.

Several more JP nominees are thinking about quitting the race, say insiders.

On Sunday, JP candidates Iqbal Hossain (Barishal 2 and 5), Kholilur Rahman (Borguna-1) and SM Niaz Uddin (Gazipur-1 and 5) announced that they would not run.

Iqbal, an adviser to the JP chairman, at a views-exchange meeting on Sunday said it seems the Election Commission is under the control of the government and the election is going to be a farcical one.

Kholilur, joint convener of Barguna district JP, told The Daily Star that some aspirants in their posters said they are supported by the Awami League while some others even printed photos of AL President Sheikh Hasina on their posters.

"If this needs to be done, then who are we?" he questioned.

Kholilur also said they were facing criticism over the party candidates' campaign strategy.

"People are not willing to cast votes for us. That's why I have decided to quit," he added.

In Brahmanbaria-1, JP candidate Shahanul Karim quit last week and extended his support to independent Syed AK Ekramuzzaman, an expelled leader of the BNP.

After a series of discussions between the top leaders of the AL and the JP, the ruling party left 26 seats for the main opposition party.

The JP on December 17 announced that it will run. Party leaders on that day said they were hopeful of

assuming power by winning the polls.

According to JP insiders, apart from the 26 seats left by the AL, JP nominees are campaigning in only 10 to 15 constituencies.

Most of the JP candidates are worried about losing their security deposits, they added.

MP hopefuls were required to deposit Tk 20,000 as security money to the Election Commission.

Several JP candidates alleged that party Chairman Quader and Secretary General Chunnun were not looking after them as they were mostly busy in campaigning in their own constituencies.

"As the chairman and the secretary general of the party, GM Quader and Mujiburul Haque Chunnun should look after all the party candidates. But they are not doing so. Rather, they are busy seeking votes for themselves," said Shafiqul Islam Sentu, a praesidium member of the JP.

The JP's election conducting committee, led by Chunnun, is also not providing necessary support to its aspirants, alleged several candidates.

A JP leader, wishing anonymity, said most of the grassroots leaders are unwilling to campaign for the party candidates as they are against the "one-sided election".

Asked about the reasons for JP candidates withdrawing, Quader yesterday told reporters in Rangpur city that withdrawal can take place due to many reasons, including threat of reprisal, intimidation, or financial constraints.

Out of the 21 seats in Barishal division, JP candidates are campaigning in only 3 to 4 constituencies, reports our local correspondent.

7.6-magnitude earthquake

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but later downgraded.

Russia and North Korea also issued tsunami warnings for some areas.

Houses have been destroyed, fires have broken out and army personnel have been dispatched to help with rescue operations, government spokesperson Yoshimasa Hayashi told reporters, adding that authorities were still assessing the damage.

The extent of any injuries and deaths was unclear. Two people recovered from quake debris in Ishikawa prefecture were unresponsive, public broadcaster NHK reported.

More strong quakes in the area, where seismic activity has been simmering for more than three years, could occur over coming days,

JMA official Toshihiro Shimoyama said.

In comments to the press shortly after the quake struck, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida also warned residents to prepare for more disasters.

Images carried by local media showed a building collapsing in a plume of dust in the city of Suzu and a huge crack in a road in Wajima where panicked-looking parents clutched their children. There have been reports of at least 30 collapsed buildings in Wajima, a town of around 30,000 known for its lacquerware, and a major blaze has engulfed several buildings.

The quake also jolted buildings in the capital Tokyo, some 500 km from Wajima on the opposite coast.