

N Korea fires shells near South's island

AFP, Seoul

North Korea fired an artillery barrage near two South Korean border islands yesterday, Seoul's defence ministry said, prompting a live-fire drill from the South Korean military.

Residents of both islands were ordered to evacuate and ferries were suspended as South Korea held a live-fire exercise after North Korea's barrage -- one of the most serious military escalations on the peninsula since Pyongyang fired shells at one of the same islands in 2010.

North Korea's military said it had conducted a naval live-fire drill as a "natural countermeasure" against South Korean threats, according to a statement in the official Korean Central News Agency.

Seoul's defence ministry said North Korea's military fired "over some 200 rounds" of artillery shells yesterday morning near Yeonpyeong and Baengnyeong, two sparsely populated South Korean islands that are just south of a defacto maritime border between the two sides.



A woman holds a child as she inspects the damage following Israeli bombardment in Rafah, on the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. Much of the Gaza Strip has been reduced to rubble, while civilian deaths have soared and the UN has warned of a humanitarian crisis that has left hundreds of thousands displaced, facing famine and disease.

PHOTO: AFP

President of Maldives to visit China Jan 8-12

REUTERS, New Delhi

The president of the Maldives, Mohamed Muizzu, will pay a state visit to China from January 8 to 12, the Chinese foreign ministry said in statement yesterday.

Multiple calls by Reuters to the Foreign Ministry and President's Office in Male yesterday -- the weekend in the Maldives -- to confirm the president's trip went unanswered.

Muizzu, who in November took over as president of the Indian Ocean nation made up of more than a hundred islands dotted with luxury resorts, issued an election pledge to remove a small contingent of some 75 Indian military personnel in the country and alter the Maldives's "India first" policy.

Asked to comment about talk of Muizzu making a state visit to China, New Delhi said the matter was out of its hands.

Zahangir

FROM PAGE 12

Zahangir Alam was suspended from the Awami League, we cannot deny that he enjoys people's trust and he has a positive image among the voters."

Expressing similar views, a good number of voters told The Daily Star that the AL candidates would not have an easy sailing in three constituencies as they would face strong challenge from the independents backed by Zahangir.

AL candidates said they were "disturbed" by Zahangir's move. They also targeted the former mayor rather than their rival candidates.

"Zahangir always opposes the party candidates. I am not calling him a rival, but I am speaking against someone who is patronising independent aspirants. His role is to find out rebel candidates and field them not only in my constituency but also in other seats," Zahid Ahsan Russel, the AL candidate in Gazipur-2, said at a campaign rally.

"Since he has black money, he believes he can do whatever he wants to," he added.

However, Zahangir during campaigning told reporters that he was supporting the independents to "protect the AL vote bank".

Zahangir was elected Gazipur mayor in 2018 on the AL's ticket. He was expelled from the party on November 19, 2021, over making derogatory remarks about Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and expressing doubts about the number of martyrs in the Liberation War.

He was suspended from the post of general secretary of Gazipur city AL.

Russell and Gazipur city AL President Azmat Ullah Khan allegedly played a key role in the suspension of Zahangir. Many believe Zahangir is backing the independents in retaliation, said locals.

The AL withdrew the expulsion order on January 21 last year.

In May, the AL Central Executive Committee again expelled him from the party for collecting nomination form to run for Gazipur city mayor violating the party's decision.

He was reinstated in the AL in October last year on the condition that he will not engage in any activities that go against the party's interest and organisational discipline in future.

Meanwhile, voters in Gazipur-3 said AL nominee Rumana Ali would face a challenge from independent aspirant Iqbal Hossain Sabuj, an incumbent MP from the ruling party.

ISRAEL BORDER VIOLENCE

More than 76,000 people displaced in Lebanon: IOM

AFP, Beirut

More than 76,000 people have been displaced in Lebanon in almost three months of near-daily fighting along the border with Israel, the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) has said.

The border area has seen a surge of violence since the Israeli offensive in Gaza broke out in early October, with tit-for-tat exchanges of fire continuing yesterday between Israeli forces and Iran-backed Hezbollah, a Lebanese ally of Palestinian group Hamas.

In a report published on Thursday, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said that the escalation has displaced 76,018 people, mainly in areas of southern Lebanon bordering Israel.

More than 80 percent of the displaced Lebanese are staying with relatives, according to the report, and only 2 percent

housed in 14 collective shelters spread across the south of the country, mainly in the coastal city of Tyre and in the Hasbaya region.

The rest have rented apartments or moved to homes in areas farther from the border, the UN agency said.

Cross-border violence has left 175 people dead in Lebanon, including 129 Hezbollah fighters and more than 20 civilians, including three journalists, according to an AFP count.

In northern Israel, nine soldiers and five civilians have been killed, according to Israeli authorities.

Hezbollah, which conducts daily operations against Israeli soldiers along the border, said it is intervening in support of Hamas in Gaza.

Tensions rose further with a strike on Tuesday that killed Hamas's number two, Saleh al-Aruri, in a Hezbollah stronghold

in south Beirut.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah warned that the assassination, widely attributed to Israel, "will not go unpunished".

He said in a speech yesterday that all of Lebanon would be exposed if the group did not react to the assassination.

Nasrallah added that its current operations on the southern borders opened a "historic opportunity" for Lebanon to liberate its land occupied by Israel and that the Islamic resistance in Iraq also has a "historic opportunity" to get rid of the US presence in that country.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Europe's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, embarked on a new diplomatic effort yesterday to stop the spillover of the conflict in Gaza to the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Lebanon and Red Sea shipping lanes.

Iran arrests suspects over bomb blasts

REUTERS

Mourners yesterday wept over the coffins of victims of two deadly blasts in Iran, and the interior minister said a number of suspects had been arrested over the attacks claimed by Islamic State. Crowds chanted "revenge, revenge" in state TV footage of the funerals in the city of Kerman, the scene



of Wednesday's explosions, the bloodiest such attacks in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Nearly 100 people were killed in the blasts at a memorial service for military commander General Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated in Iraq in 2020 by a US

drone. Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi told state TV a number of suspects had been arrested. "Our country's capable intelligence agencies have found very good clues regarding elements involved in the terrorist explosions in Kerman and a section of those who had a role in this incident have been arrested," he said. Deputy Interior Minister Majid Mirahmadi said: "Various individuals have been arrested in five cities in five provinces, who have supported this incident or been linked to it," the state news agency reported.

Russia fires North Korean missiles at Ukraine

REUTERS

Russia has hit Ukraine with missiles supplied by North Korea for the first time during its invasion, Ukrainian presidential aide Mykhailo Podolyak said yesterday, corroborating an earlier assertion by Washington. "There is no longer any disguise...as part of its outright genocidal war, the Russian Federation for the first time struck at the territory of Ukraine with missiles received from... North Korea," Podolyak wrote on X social media. Podolyak did not provide evidence for the missiles being North Korean. In its statement on Thursday, Washington cited declassified intelligence. "(Russia) is attacking Ukrainians with missiles received from a state where citizens are tortured in concentration camps for having an unregistered radio, talking to a tourist, watching TV shows," Podolyak said. There was no immediate comment from Moscow. State media quoted the governor of the eastern Ukrainian region of Kharkiv as saying missiles produced outside Russia had been fired into the province at the end of December and beginning of January.

Arsonists torch

FROM PAGE 12

among the locals ahead of the national election.

Police are investigating the incidents and trying to find the culprits, he added.

In Feni, arsonists set fire to the Charshaha Bhikari High School polling centre in Char Darbesh union under Sonagazi upazila yesterday morning.

On information, a fire engine from Sonagazi Fire Station reached the spot and brought the fire under control.

Some furniture was damaged in the fire, police said.

Police were investigating the incident to trace the criminals, said Senior Assistant Superintendent of Police Tasnim Hossain.

Security personnel weren't assigned to the schools at the time of the incidents that occurred two days before the election. Law enforcement agencies and presiding officers start working at the polling centres a day before the election, said police.

In Naogaon-5, at least six election camps of AL candidate Nizam Uddin Jalil were torched between Thursday night and early yesterday morning.

The incidents took place in Anandanagar, Chawkprosad, Mollahpara, Shingbacha and Chawkpai areas under Sadar upazila, confirmed Naogaon Sadar Police Station OC Zahidul Haque.

Istiaq Ahmed Imran, AL candidate's election campaigning coordinator, alleged that supporters of the independent candidate Dewan Sekar Ahmed Shishan carried out the arson attacks.

However, Shishan denied the allegation.

No police complaints were filed over the incidents until the report was filed last evening.

In Barguna-1, two election camps of AL candidate Dhirendra Debnath Shambhur were torched at Rodpora Market area under Sadar upazila early yesterday.

Shambhu's chief election coordinator Mujibur Rahman Kislur confirmed the incidents, but he did not mention any name of suspected

persons.

Police are trying to trace the criminals, said Additional Superintendent of Police Md Halim.

In Natore-4, an election camp of independent candidate Asif Abdullah Bin Quddus was torched by miscreants on Thursday night at Haroa area under Baraigram upazila.

"The fire destroyed the election camp. Police are trying to trace those involved with the incident," said Sirajul Islam, inspector Bonpara Police Investigation Centre.

In Chattogram-15, an election camp of independent candidate Abdul Motalab was set on fire at Borohatia union under Lohagara upazila early yesterday.

Lohagara Assistant Commissioner Nazmun Layel said, "We're looking into the matter and trying to find out the miscreants."

Meanwhile, the Election Commission has directed Barguna's Amtali upazila election officer to file a case against Amtali Municipal Mayor Matiar Rahman for intimidating voters.

Barguna District Election Officer Abdul Hai Al Hadi confirmed the matter yesterday.

In Jamalpur-4, at least ten people were injured in a clash between the supporters of AL candidate Mahbubur Rahman Helal and independent candidate Murad Hasan on Thursday night.

Locals said an electoral procession of Helal was passing through Sarishabari Bus Station area at around 8:00pm when Murad's supporters attacked it, triggering the clash that left 10 people from both groups injured.

Helal alleged that supporters of Murad attacked them first.

Shakhwat Alam Mukul, a close aide to Murad, denied the allegation and said they first came under attack by their rivals.

On information, police rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control, said Sarishabari Police Station OC Mushfiqur Rahman.

[Our correspondents from respective districts contributed to the report.]

18 ministers face stiff challenge

FROM PAGE 1

Textile and Jute Minister Gazi Golam Dastagir is facing a strong campaign from party colleague and Rugganj AL General Secretary Shahajahan Bhuiyan in Narayanganj-1.

Voters have a more favourable opinion about independent and Jubo League leader Syed Abdul Haque Suman than State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Mahbub Ali in Habiganj-4 while AL independent and former Singra upazila chairman Shafiqul Islam Shafiq is giving State Minister for Posts and Telecommunications Zunaid Ahmed Palak a run for his money in Natore-3.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam is lagging behind in his race against party independent and former general secretary of Charghat upazila AL Rahenul Haque in Rajshahi-6, according to the AL insiders.

State Minister for Social Welfare Ashraf Ali Khan Khasru has a tough challenge from AL independent and former deputy minister Arif Khan Joy in Netrokona-2.

State Minister for Public Administration Farhad Hossain is neck and neck with party independent and former Meherpur district AL president Abdul Mannan in the race for Meherpur-1, while State Minister for Disaster Management and Relief Enamur Rahman will find it difficult to beat two "AL independents" -- former MP Towhid Jung Murad and Ashulia thana unit AL General Secretary Saiful Islam in Dhaka-19.

Turnout the main challenge for EC

FROM PAGE 12

probe polls irregularities, issued about 600 show-cause notices to candidates and their supporters.

Sakhawat said one of the major challenges the EC would face is voter turnout. "I'm not sure that voters will go to cast their ballots spontaneously. If they don't and the Election Commission will be blamed."

Preventing violence and making sure the election will be meaningful will be the other challenges of the commission, he added.

"This election is already questionable as a major political party is not joining it," said Rafiqul Islam, another former election

It will be tough for State Minister for Religious Affairs Faridul Haque Khan to defeat "AL independent" and district AL leader Shahinur Rahman Shahin in Jamalpur-2.

Deputy Speaker Shamsul Haque Tuku is in tight spot as AL independent and former minister Abu Sayeed is quite popular in Pabna-1.

Deputy Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change Habibun Nahar is facing a challenge from party colleague Idris Ali in Bagerhat-3 while AL independent Khaled Shawkat Ali is giving Deputy Minister for Water Resources AKM Enamul Haque Shamim a tough time in Shariatpur-2.

On the other hand, AL praesidium member and AL election steering committee co-chairman Kazi Zafarullah is lagging behind party independent Nixon Chowdhury in Faridpur-4, while party praesidium member Abdur Rahman will have to deal with the strong challenge from former BNP leader and newly registered Bangladesh Nationalist Movement (BNM) acting chairman Shah Mohammad Abu Zafar in Faridpur-1.

AL Liberation War Affairs Secretary Mrinal Kanti Das is neck and neck with party independent and immediate past Munshiganj municipality mayor Mohammad Faisal in Munshiganj-3, while AL Cultural Affairs Secretary Ashim Kumar Ukil is facing a tough challenge from party independent

commissioner.

He added that gaining credibility after the polls will be another major challenge for the EC.

Sixteen political parties, including the BNP and its allies, are boycotting the election, saying that a free and fair election is not possible under the incumbent government.

Regarding the turnout, Rafiqul said if one percent vote is cast, the polls will get legality but not legitimacy.

He added that tackling violence will be a huge task for the commission.

"Since some parties are boycotting the election this time, turnout will definitely be a bit of a challenge. It is

and former lawmaker Itiqaar Uddin Talukder Pintu in Netrokona-3.

It will be hard for AL Organising Secretary Ahmad Hossain to beat "AL independent" Anwar Hossain in Netrokona-5.

Apart from AL and AL independent candidates, several candidates from Trinamool BNP, Kalyan Party, Jatiyo Party (who are loyal to Raushan Ershad), the BNM and former BNP leaders could win.

According to AL sources, they are Krishak Sramik Janata League leader Kader Siddiqui in Tangail-8, and independent and former AL leader Latif Siddiqui in Tangail-4, and independent and president of a social organisation named Anjumane AL Islah Husamuddin Chowdhury in Sylhet-5, Trinamool BNP Chairperson and former BNP vice chairman Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury in Sylhet-6, expelled Kalyan Party chairman Major Gen (ret'd) Syed Mohammad Ibrahim from Cox's Bazar-1, former BNP leader Mohammad Shokrana in Bogura-1, ex-BNP leader Ziaul Haque Mollah in Bogura-4, Sarkar Badol in Bogura-6, former BNP leader Syed Ekramuzzaman in Brahmanbaria-2, former BNP leader Major (ret'd) Akhtaruzzaman in Kishoreganj-2, BNM acting chairman and former BNP leader Shah Mohammad Abu Zafar in Faridpur-1, three pro-Raushan JP leaders Rustum Ali Faraji in Pirojpur-3, Mashhur Rahaman Ranga in Rangpur-1, and Ziaul Haque Mridha in Brahmanbaria-2.

not the responsibility of the Election Commission to bring the voters to the polling centres," said Election Commissioner Brig Gen (ret'd) Ahsan Habib Khan.

"Our responsibility is to ensure a situation in which candidates can campaign freely, and voters can return home safely after casting their votes without any hindrance. The commission has taken all necessary measures for this."

"Whatever the turnout is, the election will be acceptable. It will be free, fair and impartial. If there are fake votes or any irregularities in any centre, we will cancel voting at the centre," he said.