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Turnout the main challenge for EC

Experts say election to be less competitive due to boycott by BNP, allies

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

The main challenge for the Election Commission will be to hold a peaceful, acceptable election with high voter turnout as campaigning ended with violations of the electoral code of conduct, violence and little festivity.

Former election commissioners also said voters being able to vote freely was still uncertain. They pointed out that major opposition BNP has boycotted the polls, so it is less competitive and festive.

Except for the ruling Awami League, campaigns by other parties were barely seen this time, they said.

"This time campaigns lacked festivity. Many candidates did not pay heed to the electoral code of conduct and there was some violence. We had hoped that the way the January 7 polls was heading, the number of incidents of violating the electoral code and violence would be less," said Brig Gen (ret'd) Sakhawat Hussain, a former election commissioner.

"There is still doubt about voters being able to vote freely," he told The Daily Star yesterday evening.

The electioneering ended 8:00am yesterday.

At least three people were killed in pre-polls violence since December 18, when the campaigning kicked off.

According to the media, at least 156 incidents of violence occurred across the country.

Electoral enquiry committees, formed by the EC to

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Family members mourn over the bodies of children killed during Israeli bombardment as they lie at al-Najjar hospital in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Zahangir now a potential spoiler for 3 AL picks

The ex-Gazipur mayor throws his weight behind three independent candidates

MD ABBAS and ASHIK ABDULLAH APU, back from Gazipur

He is not in the election race, and yet he has emerged as an "X-factor" in the polls to three parliamentary constituencies in Gazipur.

Former Gazipur mayor Zahangir Alam, who backed his mother to get elected to the office of the city mayor in May last year by opposing the Awami League's picks, is now throwing his weight behind three independents.

Zahangir started campaigning for Md Rezaul Karim in Gazipur-1, Kazi Alim Uddin in Gazipur-2, and Akhteruzzaman in Gazipur-5 after the allocation of electoral symbols on December 17.

The following day, Zahangir was seen at a campaign rally at the Rajbari ground adjacent to the Gazipur deputy commissioner's office with the three MP candidates.

The AL nominees for the three seats are Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozzammel Haque, State Minister for Youth and Sports Zahid Ahsan Russel, and former state minister for women and children affairs Meher Afroz Chumki.

"The electoral race in Gazipur had been mundane until Zahangir hit the campaign trail," said Rafiqul Islam, a tea stall owner in Kaliganj upazila.

Local AL leaders said Zahangir has strong control over the AL grassroots and junior party leaders. He is also popular among the voters in Gazipur City Corporation area.

The former mayor carried out charity and development work which enabled him to build a "voter base" in Gazipur. He brought many leaders and activists of the AL and several other political parties into his fold.

Zahangir is also popular among the readymade garment workers, whose votes can be a deciding factor in the polls.

Wishing not to be named, a top district AL leader said, "Though

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162 Palestinians killed, 296 hurt in 24 hours

Israel hits over 100 targets across Gaza; displaced families flee for safety as 3 refugee camps bombarded

AGENCIES

The Israeli military yesterday launched air, land and sea attacks on more than 100 targets across the Gaza Strip, forcing displaced families to flee for safety riding donkey carts loaded with belongings and children.

The health ministry in the Hamas-run Palestinian territory said that 162 people were killed and 296 injured in a 24-hour period. The total recorded Palestinian death toll had reached 22,600 by yesterday - almost 1 percent of its 2.3 million population, it said.

Heavy bombardments were reported near Deir el Balah, including at the Nuseirat, al-Maghazi and Bureij refugee camps as Israeli troops forced residents to evacuate south. Israeli boats were also striking coastal areas in central Gaza.

The Palestinian Prisoners and Ex-Prisoners' Affairs Authority and the Palestinian Prisoner's Society said that about 500 people, including women and children, were interrogated by Israeli forces in the Nur Shams refugee camp in the city of Tulkarem.

"The occupation transferred about 150 Palestinians to one of its military barracks and arrested 20 others," a statement by the two groups said.

The Palestinian Ministry of Health said a 17-year-old boy was killed by Israeli forces and four others injured in Beit Rima in the West Bank.

Meanwhile, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant on Thursday evening outlined a new stage of Israel's war in Gaza: a more targeted approach in the north and further pursuit of Hamas leaders in the south while Israel seeks to free remaining hostages held by Hamas.

Under international pressure to shift to less intense combat operations and in the face of economic challenges, Israel has been drawing down its forces in Gaza to allow thousands of reservists to return to their jobs.

Gallant said in a statement that operations in the north would include raids, demolishing tunnels, air and ground strikes, and special forces operations.

After the offensive, Hamas would no longer control Gaza, Gallant said, adding that the enclave would be run by Palestinian bodies so long as there was no threat to Israel, reports Reuters.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Europe's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, were due in the Middle East yesterday to try to halt the spillover of the conflict in Gaza to the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Lebanon and Red Sea shipping lanes.

- Israeli minister lays out post-war Gaza plan
- Gaza death toll rises to 22,600
- Israeli boats strike coastal areas in central Gaza

Arsonists torch 5 polling centres in Rajshahi, Feni

10 campaign offices set on fire in 4 dists; security guard set alight in Khulna

STAR REPORT

At least five schools that are designated polling centres and 10 election camps came under arson attack between Thursday night and yesterday morning in six districts. No casualties or injuries were reported at the time of the incidents.

In Khulna-3, a security guard of an election camp of AL candidate SM Kamal Hossain was set on fire at Jogipole area in the city early yesterday.

The victim, Hasan Faraji of the same area, was sent to Khulna Medical College Hospital, said Khanjahan Ali Police Station OC Momtazul Haque.

The police officer said the security guard was asleep around 3:00am when two to three unidentified criminals poured kerosene on him and set fire.

Police are investigating into the incident to trace the criminals, he added.

Meanwhile, in Jamalpur, at least ten people were injured in a clash between the supporters of two candidates on Thursday night.

In Rajshahi, four schools were torched in three constituencies early yesterday.

The schools are: Akkelpur High School and Ganipur High School in Bagmara in Rajshahi-4 constituency; Arani Jhina Government Primary School in Rajshahi-6; and Motihar High School of Mohonpur in Rajshahi-3.

Police recovered two crude bombs from Akkelpur High School premises, said Additional Superintendent of Police Rofiqul Alam.

He suspected the attacks were carried out between midnight and 4:00am in the morning to create panic

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Adani reclaims Asia's richest mantle after scandal

Bloomberg Billionaires Index shows

AFP, New Delhi

India's Gautam Adani once again became

Asia's richest man yesterday, according to a Bloomberg index of the world's billionaires, a year after allegations of market manipulation hammered his conglomerate's stock prices.

Adani Group saw more than \$150 billion wiped from its market value after a bombshell report by US investment research firm Hindenburg Research accusing it of "brazen" corporate fraud.

The family-run conglomerate's founder, the world's second-richest person ahead of Tesla founder Elon Musk, saw his personal fortune collapse by around \$80 billion.



Covering their bodies from head to toe with whatever they can manage, homeless people sleep out in the open in the shivering cold near Government Alia Madrasa in Sylhet city's Chowhatta area. The photo was taken around 6:30am yesterday.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

Fossils of giant predator worms found in Greenland

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK



Fossils of giant predator worms dubbed "terror beasts" that colonised the water column more than 518 million years ago have been unearthed in North Greenland.

The large worms named Timorebestia, meaning "terror beasts" in Latin, were some of the earliest carnivorous animals to habit the planet, scientists from the University of Bristol in the UK said.

Growing to over 30cm in length, these worms with a distinct head, long antennae, massive jaws, and fins down the sides of their body, were some of the largest swimming animals during the Early Cambrian era over 520 million years ago.

"Timorebestia is a distant, but close, relative of living arrow worms, or chaetognaths. These are much smaller ocean predators today that feed on tiny zooplankton," study senior author Jakob Vinther said.

The worms, which were giants of their day, would have been close to the top of the food chain, researchers say.

"That makes it equivalent in importance to some of the top carnivores in modern oceans, such as sharks and seals back in the Cambrian period," Dr Vinther added.