



Hasina to cast vote at Dhaka City College

BSS, Dhaka

Awami League President and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will cast her vote at Dhaka City College polling centre this morning.

PM's Assistant Press Secretary MM Emrul Kayas confirmed the matter to BSS.

Dhaka City College centre falls under the Dhaka-10 constituency, comprising

Dhanmondi, Hazaribagh, New Market, and Kalabagan police stations.

Actor Ferdous Ahmed is contesting the polls on AL ticket from the seat.



People thronging the Railway Market in Khulna city to stock up on sweaters, jackets, gloves and more amid the ongoing moderate cold wave sweeping across the country. According to the Met, the temperature is expected to dip further over the next five days. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

3 'cattle thieves' killed in mob beating

UNB, Pabna

Three suspected cattle thieves were killed in a mob beating in Bhangura upazila of Pabna yesterday.

Police said a gang of thieves allegedly stole two cows from the shed of Golap Hossain at Mirzapur village in Chatmohar upazila and tried to flee with the cows through the Gumani River in a boat.

Locals chased the thieves and beat them to death at Betuan Ghat in Bhangura. Three local youths were injured in an attack by the thieves and were admitted to Bhangura Upazila Health Complex.

Bhangura Police OC Nazmul Haque said two sharp weapons were recovered from the spot.

The bodies of the deceased were recovered but their identities could not be ascertained immediately, he said, adding that the bodies were sent to Pabna General Hospital morgue for autopsy.

Truck driver, assistant killed in collision

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Natore

A truck driver and his assistant died on the spot after the sand-laden vehicle rear-ended another such truck on the Natore-Dhaka Highway in Baraigura upazila of Natore early yesterday.

The incident took place on the highway's Ahmedpur Karbala area around 6:30am, said Jhalmia Highway Police Station OC ANM Masud.

The deceased are truck driver Shaminur Rahman, 22, of Baripara village in Jhenaidah's Shaikupa upazila, and his assistant Jasim Uddin, 28, of the same upazila's Achintpur village.

Vote today, the outcome long known



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Brig Gen (ret'd) Sakhawat Hussain

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on rival rallies since the official start of the election campaigns on December 18.

Meanwhile, the ruling party has done everything it could to make the election look participatory and competitive. It allowed party leaders to join the polls in droves as "independent" candidates. As a result, in every seat, two or more AL candidates are pitted against each other. A fierce competition is expected in many of these seats.

In a never-before-seen tactic, the AL also instructed its grassroots to support aspirants from other little-known parties that were formed recently, allegedly with government blessings.

The AL also formed dedicated teams across the country to bring as many voters as possible to the polling centres to ensure high turnout in efforts to garner international support.

"Come to the polling centres without fear and cast your vote to exercise your constitutional rights. Don't bow down to any intervention and intimidation," AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader told a press conference in his Noakhali-5 constituency yesterday.

In a televised address to the nation, Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal also called upon the voters to cast their ballots, saying they are ready to hold the polls in a way that will be accepted at home and abroad.

"The election will be free and fair and voters will get a chance to exercise their voting rights freely," he said.

As many as 11.93 crore people are eligible to vote.

More than 7.5 lakh members of law enforcement agencies and security forces have been deployed to ensure law and order during the polls.

Today's election comes amid pressure from the US and some other Western nations, calling for a free and fair election.

In September last year, the US announced sanctions on some individuals for undermining the voting process, and warned of imposing further sanctions on the same grounds.

Former Election Commissioner Brig Gen (ret'd) Sakhawat Hussain termed today's polls a unique one compared to the previous two elections.

"The election in 2014 was voter-less while many centres saw night-time voting in the 2018 election.

"But this time, the election is taking place between candidates from the same party in the name of independents and dummies. As a result, voters are less interested about the polls," said Sakhawat.

He also said some parties that joined the race are not well-known, while some are facing existential crisis.

"So, it is a unique model election ... Results of the election is certain, everybody knows who is going to win. The only thing that is uncertain is who will be in the opposition bench," he added.

Over the last one year, BNP had gathered some momentum to intensify its movement to unseat the government through peaceful programmes.

But it all went out of their hand on October 28, when its Dhaka rally was foiled in the face of heavy police action following clashes between BNP and AL activists.

Ever since, the government launched a countrywide crackdown

on opposition leaders and supporters.

Since October, more than 27,000 BNP leaders and activists have been rounded up across the country, according to BNP data, which The Daily Star could not verify.

Dozens of them are top leaders, including its Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir.

In the 24 hours preceding last evening alone, at least 255 party leaders and activists were detained and 16 cases were filed against 1,355 named and many unidentified people, BNP said.

Additionally, at least 1,700 BNP leaders and activists have been sentenced to prison over the last two months in political cases filed over a decade ago.

At a virtual press conference yesterday, BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi called on "every democratic voter" to boycott the election.

"As a citizen of the state who has been deprived of the rights for the last 15 years, boycott them [the government] at least for one day, on January 7.

"Believe it, your decision on this one day will lead to the fall of the fascist government in Bangladesh," said Rizvi.

"We are deeply concerned over the recent incidents of vandalism and violence. Yet, as part of our constitutional duty, we urge all voters to visit the polling centres and cast ballots," Habibul said.

He requested the voters not to be influenced by any persuasion or intervention. "If you face any obstacles, inform the presiding officer about it immediately."

Habibul said dialogues and constructive engagements can resolve any political crisis in the country.

"A conducive political environment is needed for holding a free, fair, participatory and festive election. But it is undeniable that there are differences of opinion among the political leadership regarding elections," he said.

"The party will send copies of a

detailed report on the election with documents to all foreign embassies and missions in Dhaka.

Although the BNP is enforcing hartal, its grassroots have been asked not to engage in any violence or confrontation with the law enforcers and the ruling party men.

Party sources said the ongoing hartal, which will end at 6:00am tomorrow, may be extended for another day rejecting the polls results.

The BNP standing committee, the highest policymaking body of the party, will meet tonight to decide its next course of action, the sources added.

The party boycotted the January 5, 2014, polls demanding election under a non-party interim government. It, however, ran in the 2018 polls but won only a few seats. Those two elections drew huge criticism from different quarters at home and abroad over widespread irregularities.

The CEC said conflicts and violence stemming from the differences of opinion are unexpected.

"There should be a permanent solution to this situation and the political leadership should take a serious initiative in this regard. It is necessary not just for today but for securing a better future also."

The CEC asked the officers carrying out election duties to discharge their responsibilities with sincerity and honesty by applying all electoral rules and regulations.

He warned that any negligence of duties and dishonesty will not be tolerated.

"If any information or proof of vote rigging, snatching of ballots, transaction of money and use of muscle power in favour of any candidate is found, the candidacy of the aspirant concerned will be cancelled immediately," Habibul said.

If required, the voting in a particular constituency or a polling centre will be postponed, he said.

Social media BNP's last resort to dissuade voters

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joint secretary general of the BNP, said at a virtual press briefing yesterday.

Party leaders believe violence between the supporters of the ruling AL candidates and those of the independents will occur in many places, which will impact the voter turnout.

"Video footage of those incidents will be published on social media. This will have an impact on the voters' mind too which will reduce the turnout," said a BNP leader, wishing anonymity.

Another party leader said although the BNP is boycotting the polls, a team will collect election-related information to prepare a report on the polls.

A monitoring cell has been set up to coordinate the collection of information and the BNP will brief the media on its findings after the voting ends, said sources.

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15 polling centres

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In the capital's Jurain early yesterday, Rab arrested three men in possession of 58 crude bombs.

In Rajshahi, police said information given by an arrested BNP activist led to the recovery of 10 crude bombs from a polling centre in the Uposhohor area.

Moshiar Rahman, an inspector of the Detective Branch of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police, said the BNP man is Sujon Hossain Tawhid, 38, an aide to local Jubo Dal leader Mahfijur Rahman Riton.

Police also said at least two crude bombs exploded in Rajshahi city yesterday.

In Narayanganj, police recovered an improvised explosive device from under the seat of a bus.

Classrooms were set on fire in three schools in Gazipur and Kaliakair, four in Netrokona's Kendua, three in Mymensingh's Gafargaon, Multagachha and Nandail, and one each in Habiganj's Chunarughat, Chattogram, Sherpur, Patuakhali, and Shariatpur.

On Friday night, a madrasa and a school in Barguna's Amtali and two schools in Khulna's Rupsha and Dumuria were set on fire.

Yesterday, arsonists set fire to two articulated trucks and two

lorries in Feni, a flatbed and a bus in Chattogram's Sitakunda and Kalughat areas, and a car in Mymensingh.

In Khagrachhari, a vehicle carrying Additional Deputy Commissioner Zonayed Kabir Sohag was vandalised on Khagrachhari-Dighinala road. The official was not hurt.

In Faridpur, independent AK Azad again alleged that his supporters were facing threats from ruling party activists campaigning for Shamim Haque.

The latter refuted the allegation. In Rajbari, the body of village police Ranajit Kumar Dey, 45, was found next to the polling centre he was guarding early yesterday, said Alamgir Hossain, officer-in-charge of Baliakandi Police Station, adding that there were marks of strangulation around his neck.

In Ramu, Cox's Bazar, arsonists set fire to U Chai Chan Ramu Buddhist Temple around 2:00am. A wooden staircase was burnt down. But prompt efforts of the devotees and locals saved the temple, said Moung Kev, president of the temple management committee.

"Security camera footage shows a man in a mask setting fire under the staircase and leaving the premises," he said.

This is among the temples that were set on fire in 2012, he added.

that it would witness less violence due to the absence of the major opposition BNP and other parties.

"Such a situation was not seen in any other previous elections. It would be interesting to see who would be the opposition after the election."

One of the challenges for the Election Commission would be to ensure spontaneous participation of voters in the election.

If voters are forced to go to the polling centres to increase the turnout, it would not be acceptable, said Hossain, a retired brigadier general of Bangladesh Army.

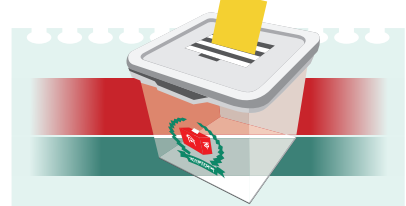
"No festivity was seen during the campaign."

He went on to highlight the lack of a conducive atmosphere for free and fair polls.

"I doubt if the voters would be able to cast ballots freely."

Five people died in pre-polls violence as of yesterday.

Hossain's hope for this election is



ON POLLS DUTY

Returning officers **66**

Assistant returning officers **590**

Presiding officers **42,024**

Assistant presiding officers **2,60,856**

Polling officers **5,21,712**

Election enquiry committee **300**

Judicial magistrates **653**

Executive magistrates **2,076**

Army members **3,8154**

Navy members **2,827**

Ansar members **5,14,288**

Police members **1,74,767**

Rab 600 teams, 95 on reserve

BGB members **45,185**

Coastguard members **2,520**

OBSERVERS

Local observers: **20,733** (84 organisations)

Foreign observers: **126**

'Polls short of desired competition'

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the CEC said in a televised address to the nation yesterday evening.

He called upon the voters to exercise their voting right freely braving all fears and concerns.

"We are deeply concerned over the recent incidents of vandalism and violence. Yet, as part of our constitutional duty, we urge all voters to visit the polling centres and cast ballots," Habibul said.

He requested the voters not to be influenced by any persuasion or intervention. "If you face any obstacles, inform the presiding officer about it immediately."

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People take part in a protest in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza in London, Britain yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS