

IS kills two pro-Iran fighters in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Two pro-Iranian fighters from the Hashed al-Shaabi alliance were killed in an attack in Iraq, the Hashed and an Iraqi security source said yesterday, blaming the Islamic State group (IS).

The two fighters "succumbed after having been wounded while they were confronting an attack" by IS in Salaheddin province north of Baghdad, the Hashed said in a statement reported by the official INA news agency.

A security source, who requested anonymity, confirmed the death toll to AFP and said that IS attacked a Hashed (military) post on Saturday night in the area of al-Zarka in the province's north.

The Hashed al-Shaabi is a coalition of mainly pro-Iranian former paramilitary units, mostly from the Shia branch of Islam.



Relatives of Ukrainian military prisoners of war, specifically captives from the siege of Mariupol, hold placards which read "Free Azovstal defenders" as they demand their release during a rally in Kyiv, Ukraine yesterday, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. PHOTO: AFP

Maldives suspends three ministers for insulting India PM

REUTERS, Male

The Maldives government has suspended three deputy ministers for disparaging India's prime minister, an official said yesterday, during a dip in ties with its powerful neighbour.

Malsha Shareef, Mariyam Shiuna and Abdulla Mahzoom Majid all worked for the archipelago's Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Information and Arts and were disciplined for their comments on social media, the senior government official told Reuters.

The three had variously labelled Indian PM Narendra Modi a "clown", "terrorist" and "puppet of Israel" on social media platform X, in response to a video of him visiting the Indian islands of Lakshadweep to promote local tourism.

Some viewed his visit as trying to draw tourists away from the globally popular Maldives, whose 1,192 islands in the Indian Ocean are dotted with luxury resorts.

The controversy came ahead of a visit by President Mohamed Muizzu to China on January 8-12. Muizzu won election last year with a pledge to end the Maldives' "India first" policy in a region where New Delhi and Beijing compete for influence.

Muizzu also pledged to remove a small contingent of 75 Indian military personnel from the nation of just over half a million people.

Some prominent Indians, including actor Akshay Kumar and cricketer Hardik Pandya, expressed dismay at the comments by the now suspended Maldivian officials.

Neither of the three were immediately available for comment.

People shunned

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On his claim that even AL supporters did not vote, he said they knew their candidates would win anyway.

"Why would they go to the polls? That is why turnout was almost zero or minimal," he continued.

He said people want their voting rights back and that BNP has been waging a movement to that end.

BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi has congratulated the voters for "boycotting the election" saying they have given an "unprecedented verdict against the government's stage-managed election".

During a virtual press conference, Rizvi also claimed that the turnout was not more than two percent.

"Our call for boycotting the election is a success," he said, adding, people have rejected the government's "dummy election".

Rizvi also said several of the independent candidates belonging to AL have boycotted the election and came up with allegations that those who contested with "boat" symbol had thrown them away from polling centres.

Two 'boat'

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There were four polling centres at that institution, and Shibani was turned away from all four of them.

Shibani claimed she cast her vote at the same location in the 2018 polls, and the app she used to find her polling centre, directed her there. However, the polling officials claimed her NID number did not match, and she couldn't vote.

Free lunch

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department provided money for our lunch," said Zahirul Islam, in charge of the polling station. Rafiqul Islam, cultural secretary of Adabor Thana AL, said, "In the spirit of the election festivities, we are serving lunch to everyone working at this polling station."

Besides, police members at Dhaka North City School and College, who were also having lunch provided by the AL candidate, declined to comment.

AL men crowd

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to 445 within some hours, as told by the presiding officer over a phone call in the early evening.

In both male and female centres, polling agents of only two candidates: Awami League and Jatiyo Party (Manju), were seen.

Meanwhile, at Silver Dale Preparatory and Girls High School in Wari, 40 out of 3,420 votes were cast till 10:30am, according to presiding officer Prokash Chandra Sarker. Later, he confirmed a total of 838 voters had voted by 4:00pm.

Show ink mark

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live at the slum while the others shifted elsewhere, said Maulana Abdus Sobhan, president of Korail Slum Development Committee and vice-president of 19 ward Awami League.

"We are urging those 14,000 voters to exercise their civic rights. We are just urging them to visit the centres and vote for any candidate they prefer, regardless of what symbol they bear," he added.

AK Azad braves all odds, comes out victorious

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Officer Mizanur Rahman said those ballots would be excluded.

Around 10:30am, casting of ballots was suspended for about one and a half hours at the Ranokal Government Primary School polling centre in Kanaipur following clashes between the supporters of the two candidates.

Awlad Hossain Babor, president of Faridpur Nagarik Mancha, said the election in Faridpur was largely peaceful.

"No vote-rigging took place. However, some untoward incidents happened. Had the opposition parties joined the polls, it would have been a more participatory election."

One killed, 29 hurt

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In Tangail's Gopalpur, supporters of independent candidate Yunus Islam Talukder Thandu snatched a ballot box containing around 300 ballot papers and set it on fire around 3:30pm.

They assaulted two Ansar members who tried to stop them. Police used firearms to calm the situation.

On Saturday night and yesterday, around 125 crude bombs exploded in the capital, Rajshahi and Habiganj.

The election was held amid a 48-hour hartal called by the BNP and its like-minded parties that boycotted the election.

From January 5 evening till last night, firefighters reported 29 incidents of fire on vehicles, polling centres, a train, and a temple.

In Cumilla's Debidwar upazila, a 60-year-old man named Nawab Ali died after several supporters of Abul Kalam Azad, an Awami League leader who ran as an independent, shoved him and he fell to ground, said his son Jewel Rana, adding that his father was returning home after casting his vote around 10:00am.

Police said there was no injury mark on the body.

As armed groups engaged in a clash in the morning in Chattogram's Khulshi area, a college student named Shanto Barua, 24, got shot in the stomach when he was walking to a nearby polling centre.

Another person who got shot in the incident was named by police as Muhammad Jamal, 35, a resident of Arju Mia Colony.

Seeking anonymity, a sub-inspector of police said in the photos of the

Apathy runs deep among young voters

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rigging overrode her desire to vote, she refrained from voting this year as well.

Meanwhile, NGO worker Ridwanul Haque, who became a voter in Khagrachhari in 2009, did not vote both in 2014 and 2018 due to what he said was a "lack of candidates worth voting for".

"This year was no different for him. My vote is important. I prefer not to vote in this election as I cannot term it an election. It is rather a selection."

Though many have chosen to refrain from voting, others had their own reasons to go to the voting booths yesterday.

"When I was in school, a teacher of mine told me about how many women fought for the right to vote. After they sacrificed so much so that I have this right as a woman, why shouldn't I exercise it?" said Nazia Hoque, 32, a Dhaka voter who first voted in 2014.

IS claims bus blast that killed two in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for a blast that killed two people and wounded 14 others on a bus in a mostly Shia neighbourhood in Kabul on Saturday.

Kabul police spokesman Khalid Zadrar said the explosion occurred in the capital's Dasht-e-Barchi neighbourhood -- an enclave of the historically oppressed Shia Hazara community.

"According to initial information, unfortunately, two civilians in the bus were killed and 14 others were injured," Zadrar said in a statement.

"The injured were rushed to hospitals and police are investigating the incident."

incident taken by reporters, a man who was seen brandishing a firearm is Chhaura League activist Shamim Azad. Shamim is a follower of Chattogram City Corporation Councillor Wasim Uddin, also vice president of Chattogram city Jubo League.

When The Daily Star reporter contacted Wasim over the phone, he said he knows Shamim. "But I don't know what he was doing at the time. I was not present at the scene. I don't know anything," he said and disconnected the phone.

In the port city's Chandgaon area, clashes between police and BNP activists took place at regular intervals throughout the day while four people were injured as supporters of rivals candidates clashed in Dohazari.

Besides, a presiding officer of a polling centre in Chattogram's Patia was assaulted when he tried to stop a group of men from stamping ballot papers around 2:00pm.

In Rajshahi last night, two policemen and two Ansar members were injured in clashes between law enforcers and supporters of an independent candidate. At least two motorcycles of law enforcers were damaged in the clashes.

In Jamalpur, at least 12 people were injured in clashes between supporters of Jamalpur-4 AL nominee Mahbubur Rahman and independent Abdur Rashid Helal.

Police fired five bullets to bring the situation under control, said Mushiqr Rahman, OC of Sarishabari Police Station.

Voting remained suspended for almost half an hour at a polling centre

It's tough

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they became a "bonafide opposition", she said.

"The opposition and the actors have been set, and the 'hero' of the play is in the spotlight. The 'villain' has been successfully slain, and the story unfolds in a drama called casting vote.

"This was an election without grammar... I did not see an election. It didn't fit into anything... results were the same," she added.

She further said that everything went according to plan.

"Peaceful elections, with stray incidents of violence, one dead, and some fake votes and skirmishes! Way better than any of the past elections we had! This ended with the EC declaring it a free, fair, peaceful election," Sharmeen said.

She added that 20, 30, or 40 percent turnout did not matter to those who won the election.

due to the incident, the OC added.

In Patuakhali, six people including personal assistant of Jatiyo Party leader ABM Ruhul Amin Hawlader were wounded when a group of 50 to 60 people allegedly led by AL nominated candidate and AL organising secretary Afzal Hossain's brother Kamal Hossain attacked JP supporters in Kachabunia area of Patuakhali-1 constituency in the afternoon.

Kamal could not be reached for comments.

Muhammad Jashim, OC of Patuakhali Sadar Police Station, said he heard that there was a scuffle between two groups.

In Narayanganj's Arahajar upazila, voting at Ramchandradi Government Primary School was suspended due to alleged attacks and vandalism by JP supporters.

Two JP supporters were injured as police opened fire.

The JP said its supporters were protesting voter fraud.

In Narsingdi, a vehicle carrying AL nominee Fazle Rabbi Khan was vandalised allegedly by the supporters of AL leader and independent Sirajul Islam Mollah. Sirajul said the allegation was baseless.

In Faridganj, Chandpur, supporters of two rival camps clashed and a police vehicle was vandalised during the incident.

In Noakhali's Senbagh, rival groups used firearms in a clash near a polling station leaving six men injured.

Crude bomb explosions left four people, including a child, injured near a polling centre in the capital's Hazaribagh.

have already voted and can't wait to see who wins!"

Like her, many first-time voters were excited.

Mritika, a 21-year-old student of Dhaka University, said, "While there was no particular party on my mind, I still wanted to vote and I did because I have the right to. It was exciting for me to cast my first vote."

At the end of the day, the sentiments among the young electors was a melting pot of "to do or not to do", as expressed by Saudia Afrin, a senior executive at a private firm, who did not vote this year.

"One part of me thought I shouldn't be a part of an election like this, while the other part said it doesn't matter anyway. I ultimately ended up not going to vote."

(Our correspondents from different constituencies contributed to this report.)

Turnout galloped

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data on turnout was not functional after 4:00pm and did not provide data on the final voter turnout as of filing this report at 11:00pm.

However, at the end of the voting, the national turnout was "approximately 40 percent", according to the chief election commissioner.

While the turnout of about 50 constituencies crawled as the hours ticked over, data from some constituencies stood out.

At 10:00am yesterday, only 6 percent votes had been cast in Rajshahi-4. Between 10:00am and 2:00pm, the voting rate skyrocketed 617 percent, the fastest in any constituency.

The turnout in Rajshahi-4 at 2:00pm was 43 percent, showed Election Commission data.

Rajshahi-4, comprising Bagmara, went to polls amid an intense intra-party rivalry between Awami League-nominated candidate Abul Kalam Azad and "AL independent" Enamul Haque.

Analysts predicted a hard-fought battle and a comparatively higher turnout in the constituency.

The rivalry between the two was so strong that 10 out of the 13 instances of pre-polls violence in the district happened in Bagmara. Two schools serving as voting centres were set on fire before the election.

Bogura-4 saw the second highest voting rate climb, this newspaper found.

According to sources, the entirety of the AL grassroots threw their weight behind ex-BNP leader Ziaul Haque Mollah as a part of a seat-sharing deal with the AL's 14-party allies, leaving the AL nominee and incumbent lawmaker Karim Tansen hanging out to dry.

At 10:00am, a paltry 3 percent of the voters showed up in Bogura-4 but by 2:00pm, the turnout shot up to 20 percent.

Tansen eventually won by a narrow margin.

The nationwide turnout at 2:00pm was 33 percent, according to the data provided by the EC app. While the turnout in Bogura-4 was less than the average, the sudden climb towards the end of the day made it stand out.

Sirajganj-4 saw the third-highest climb rate between 10:00am and 2:00pm. It had a 6 percent turnout in the morning and 36 percent in the afternoon.

AL nominee Md Shafiqul Islam had no real contender. His rival from Jatiyo Party had unofficially pulled out a day before and many voters considered the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal candidate a prop.

JP slumps

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After hectic discussions between senior leaders of the AL and the JP, the ruling party left 26 seats for the JP. All the 11 winners contested in those shared constituencies.

Meanwhile, JP Chairman GM Quader yesterday said, "We always feared we might be sacrificed after being drawn into the race, and a real one-party rule would be established. It will be clear in the afternoon whether our concern is justified."

"As we have joined the electoral race, there is no scope for boycotting right now. We have to announce programmes after seeing the polls results," he said replying to a query from a journalist after overseeing voting in Rangpur-3.

JP presidium member Sherifa Quader, wife of Quader, lost the polls to Dhaka-18. Among the other party candidates who lost the elections include Shamim Haider Patwary from Gaibandha-1 and Fakhrul Imam from Mymensingh-8.

Yesterday, 11 JP candidates withdrew halfway through the election alleging widespread irregularities, including stuffing of ballots and capturing of polling centres, in their respective constituencies.

In the around 10 previous days, a

The seat with the highest turnout at 2:00pm was Gopalganj-3, the seat of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. At 2:00pm, this constituency had a 62 percent turnout.

Chattogram-6 followed close behind with a 61 percent turnout at 2:00pm. This is the constituency of AL bigshot ABM Fazle Karim Chowdhury.

Faridpur-4 saw a strong battle between Kazi Zafarullah, AL praesidium member and steering committee co-chairperson who had designed the party's entire election campaign, and Mujibur Rahman Chowdhury Nixon, Jubo League praesidium member and the prime minister's cousin.

This high-voltage battle saw a turnout of 54 percent at 2:00pm.

The neck-and-neck battle in Natore-3 between former Singra upazila chairman Shafiqul Islam Shafiq and State Minister of ICT Zunaid Ahmed Palak resulted in a voter turnout of 47 percent at 2:00pm.

Even though Gopalganj-1 is an AL stronghold, the boat insignia still had to face a tough challenge in the form of "AL independent" and former Muksudpur upazila chairman Kabir Miah. The AL nominee for the constituency is party praesidium member Faruk Khan.

Since both the candidates were heavyweights, the turnout was 47 percent at 2:00pm.

Faruk Khan eventually had a narrow win.

In Madaripur-1, AL candidate had no real competition but the chief whip and cousin to the PM Noor-e-Alam Chowdhury drew in a voter turnout of 47 percent in the afternoon.

Khulna-1 saw a 45 percent turnout at 2:00pm. This constituency has the highest number of voters from the Hindu community. In addition, the AL and the "AL independent" candidates are from the religious community.

The Daily Star correspondents saw ballot stuffing in polling centres of several constituencies. Most of those constituencies had a low turnout.

In Dhaka-13, our correspondent observed ballot stuffing in seven polling centres. Dhaka-13 had a 4 percent turnout at 10:00am and only increased to 15 percent at 2:00pm.

In Dhaka-10, our correspondents saw ballot stuffing in two voting centres. By 2:00pm, the turnout was 15 percent.

Similarly, our correspondents observed Bangladesh Chhatra League men barge into Curzon Hall of Dhaka-8, throw out journalists and stuff ballot boxes. Dhaka-8 had a turnout of only 14 percent at 2:00pm.

total of 31 JP picks formally announced withdrawal from the race alleging that the polls would be one-sided and would not be free and fair, said JP Joint Office Secretary Mahmud.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Rejaul Razi Swapan Chowdhury, JP nominee for Thakurgaon-1, alleged that supporters of the AL candidate captured almost all polling centres in his constituency with the help of local administration and police.

"My polling agents were driven out of different voting centres by the Awami League candidate's men."

"I visited many polling centres and found the allegations to be true. Around 2:00pm, I announced quitting the election protesting vote-rigging," he said.

Mohammad Ali and several other JP candidates echoed Rejaul's allegations.

The 11 candidates who quit the polls race yesterday are Rejaul Razi Swapan Chowdhury (Thakurgaon-1), Md Delowar (Lalmonirhat-2), Johurul Haq (Jashore-4), Mohammad Ali (Tangail-1), Enayet Hossain (Mymensingh-2), Mir Shamsul Alam Lipton (Jamalpur-3), ANM Rafiqul Islam Selim (Narsingdi-2), Alamgir Sikdar Loton (Narayanganj-2), Yahya Chowdhury (Sylhet-2), Sazzad Rashid (Chandpur-4) and Nurul Amin Sikdar Vhuttu (Cox's Bazar-4).