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Polls largely 'free and fair'

Say some foreign observers

DIPLMATIC CORRESPONDENT

A section of the foreign observers yesterday said the polls were by and large held in a free and fair manner, but lamented the boycott of the major opposition BNP and the incidents of electoral violence.

Observers from India, China, Russia, Japan, Nigeria, Gambia, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, the Arab Parliament and the African Electoral Alliance particularly lauded the election process and arrangements for voting in some 44,000 polling stations for 120 million voters.

They came to Bangladesh to observe the polls at the invitation of the Election Commission. The foreign ministry provided logistical support for them to visit the polling centres in and outside the capital.

The EU's four-member Election Expert Mission, the five-member joint technical assessment team of the International Republic Institute and National Democratic Institute, and the Commonwealth's election observers are yet to issue any statement.

"We wish to recognise and commend the excellent work of the Bangladesh Election Commission in marshalling all the institutions of the state and delivering a free, fair and successful election," said Canadian MP Chandra Arya.

He said he did not find any voter being prevented from voting, and that the election procedures were quite efficient.

Asked how he assesses the BNP's boycott and the low voter turnout, Arya said, "Boycott is a tactical or strategic decision by a political party", adding that he could not comment on it.

About voter turnout, he referred to the 43 percent

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Ignoring the demarcation pillars set up by the BIWTA, encroachers have illegally filled up a portion of the Turag, near the Birulia-Ashulia highway on the outskirts of the capital, and made their own garden there. The photo was taken from the Birulia bridge recently.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

It's tough to make sense of election like this

Says polls observer Sharmeen Murshid

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

This election was very difficult for the people to comprehend, said election observer Sharmeen Murshid.

"It was a many-layered, complex venture initiated by one party taking along 27 others, all either sharing the same symbol -- the boat -- or blessed by the initiator," Sharmeen, chief executive officer at the election observation group Brotect, said in an impromptu reaction to The Daily Star.

For the first time, the country witnessed a party pitting its candidates against its own ranks, she noted.

Additionally, for the first time, seats were given to opponents so that

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KUTUPALONG CAMP Fire renders nearly 7,000 Rohingyas homeless

DIPLMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Nearly 7,000 Rohingyas have become homeless overnight as a fire blazed through a crammed refugee camp in Cox's Bazar early yesterday.

Nearly 800 shelters are feared to have been destroyed in the largest fire in the camps this year, according to the UN Refugee Agency.

The fire that broke out around 1:00am at a Kutupalong camp in Ukhiya upazila, was brought under control by 4:00am.

Additionally, some 93 shelters were partially damaged, and around 120 facilities, including learning centres, mosques, healthcare centres, latrines and bathing facilities, water points, and solar street lights, have also been destroyed or damaged by the inferno.

No casualties were reported immediately as a result of the fire, according to a statement from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Dhaka.

UNHCR and its humanitarian partners were scrambling to respond

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Western diplomats seek to prevent Gaza spillover

Blinken, Borrell continue ME tour to try to reduce tensions; gun battles intensify in enclave

AGENCIES

Top US and European diplomats yesterday sought ways to keep the Gaza offensive from spreading further in the Middle East, but three months after the start of the conflict, more bloodshed underlined the difficulties they face.

Gun battles intensified in the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis as well as in districts in the centre of the densely populated Palestinian enclave.

Smoke rose from the sites of Israeli bombing yesterday morning east and north of Khan Younis. Israeli strikes on houses in Khan Younis killed 50 people, health officials in Nasser Hospital said.

An Israeli air strike had killed two journalists in Rafah. Mustafa Thuria, a video stringer for AFP news agency, and Hamza Wael Dahdouh, a journalist with Al Jazeera television network, were killed while they were travelling in a car.

The Israeli strikes have killed 22,835 Palestinians so far, according to health ministry in Gaza yesterday. The ministry had recorded 113 deaths over the past 24 hours, while a total of 58,416 people had been wounded in the Gaza Strip in the three months of fighting.

Outside Gaza, there was fresh violence

in the occupied West Bank.

Israeli aircraft fired on Palestinian group who had attacked troops in the West Bank, the military said, and Palestinian health officials said seven Palestinians were killed in the strike.

- 113 Palestinians killed in Gaza in 24 hours
- Two Palestinian journos killed in Rafah
- 7 Palestinians killed in West Bank clashes
- Gaza death toll rises to 22,835

An Israeli border police officer was killed and others wounded when their vehicle was hit by an explosive device during operations in the West Bank city of Jenin, the military and police said.

The West Bank had already seen its highest levels of unrest in decades during the 18 months before the October 7 offensive.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the European Union's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, were on separate trips to the region to try to quell spillover from the war into Lebanon, the West Bank and Red Sea shipping lanes, reports Reuters.

"We have an intense focus on preventing this conflict from spreading," said Blinken, who was in Jordan yesterday and will also travel to Israel, the West Bank, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt during his fourth trip to the region.

Jordan's King Abdullah urged Blinken to use Washington's influence over Israel to press it for an immediate ceasefire, a palace statement said, warning him of the "catastrophic repercussions" of Israel's continued military campaign.

Blinken, who visited Turkey and Greece at the start of his trip, will use the visits to press hesitant Muslim nations in the region to prepare to play a role in the reconstruction, governance and security of Gaza if and when Israel achieves its goal of eliminating Hamas, said a senior State Department official.

The fighting has displaced most of the enclave's 2.3 million population, with many homes and civilian infrastructure left in ruins amid acute shortages of food, water and medicine.

Over 70 ancient mummies with false heads found in Peru

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Archaeologists have unearthed 73 strange mummies in Peru, some with carved masks, from different time periods ranging from around AD800 to AD1100.

The mummies were found in funerary bundles in a "spectacular" state of preservation at Pachacamac -- the site of an extensive complex of cemeteries dating to the expansion period of the Wari empire.

Some of the mummies came with masks made of carved wood and ceramics, on so-called "false heads", meant to give the dead a lifelike presence as they moved to the "world of the ancestors", say researchers from the University of Warsaw.

Mummified bundles unearthed in the recent dig also came wrapped in fabric and rope, some of which were also colourful.

The deceased were believed to move to the realm of their ancestors under the condition that "family members did their duty and prepared the deceased to continue living", researchers said.

"This duty to ensure the continuity of life after life to one's immediate ancestors was taken very seriously," they added.

Near the mummified remains, archaeologists also discovered two wooden staffs with images of dignitaries of the Wari empire.



Iranian woman gets 74 lashes for 'violating public morals'

AFP, Tehran

Iranian authorities have whipped a woman 74 times for "violating public morals" and fined her for not covering her head, the judiciary said.

"The convicted, Roya Heshmati, encouraged permissiveness (by appearing) disgracefully in busy public places in Tehran," the judiciary's Mizan Online website said late on Saturday.

"Her penalty of 74 strokes of the lash was carried out in accordance with the law and with sharia," and "for violating public morals," Mizan said.

All women in Iran have been required by law to cover their neck and head since shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Whippings for breaching the dress code are uncommon in Iran, although officials have increasingly cracked down on those defying the rules after the practice surged during anti-government protests that began in late 2022.

Those protests were triggered by the September 2022 death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurd arrested for an alleged breach of the Islamic republic's strict dress code for women.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Relatives mourn next to the bodies of Palestinians killed in an Israeli strike in Khan Younis of the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

BALLOT STUFFING ATTEMPT 2 Star reporters cornered for bearing witness

ARAFAT RAHAMAN and SIRAJUL ISLAM RUBEL

Around 1:50pm, a group of youths were seen forming an orderly queue to enter the polling centre in Segunbagicha High School under Dhaka-8 constituency to cast their votes.

But their plan came undone when one of their associates was turned away from voting.

The youth was carrying a voting slip against which the vote had already been cast. And his face did not match with the slip.

He then attempted to flee the scene when one of the correspondents stopped him to enquire why he could not cast his vote. The youth ignored the correspondent and hurriedly ran away.

The correspondents followed the youth outside. He reunited with his associates, all aged between 15-35 and with badges of the Awami League's symbol boat.

The group was sending five to six youths to the polling booths at a time to cast votes although they were not actual voters. Around 2:00pm, they were seen stepping into another centre that was located just metres away.

At that centre too, their plan was thwarted. This time, it was the centre's presiding officer Md Raihul Karim who stopped them as one of the youths looked suspiciously under-age. Karim handed the youth to the police officer stationed at the centre.

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