

## Last polls most free, fair since 1975: PM

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said last month's national election that handed her the fourth consecutive term in office was the most free, fair, and impartial polls in the country since 1975.

She made the remark while exchanging views with local leaders and activists of Awami League and its associate bodies and local public representatives from Gopalganj's Tungipara at the Gono Bhaban.

Hasina said, "Many conspiracies were afoot to thwart the election as a party [BNP] founded by a military dictator wanted to prevent this democratic process.

"But the most important thing was that people spontaneously went to polling stations and cast their ballots," said the AL president.

She said the journey ahead of Bangladesh would not be so easy in the days to come. Many obstacles have to be overcome.

The PM said Bangladesh today has come a long way in socio-economic development. "The people of Bangladesh are financially solvent today."

Talking about commodity prices, Hasina said the people on a fixed income are facing some difficulties.

"If we all cultivate the fallow land, there will be no shortage of food. Rather, we can have surplus."

She said all fallow land will have to be brought under cultivation and the government would extend assistance to the people in this regard.

The premier urged the local government representatives to ensure that development projects are implemented properly. She asked them to gain public trust and confidence by their deeds.

BNP and like-minded parties boycotted the January 7 polls demanding elections under a non-party interim government.

## US presence 'disrupts' ME security: Iran

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi yesterday criticised the deployment of US troops in the Middle East, saying it "disrupts security".

"The presence of US forces in our region has no justification," Raisi said in a Tehran ceremony ahead of the 45th anniversary of Iran's Islamic revolution on February 12.

Referring to both past and present deployments, he said the US presence "in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and the region is in no way creating security."



PHOTO: AFP

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

# Hamas proposes 3-stage Gaza truce

### US sees proposal as step towards wider peace

AGENCIES

Hamas has proposed a three-stage ceasefire plan that would quiet the guns in Gaza for four and a half months, during which all hostages would go free, Israel would withdraw its troops from the Gaza Strip and an agreement would be reached on an end to the offensive.

The Palestinian group's proposal - a response to an offer sent last week by Qatari and Egyptian mediators - comes in the biggest diplomatic push yet for an extended halt to the fighting, and was met with hope and relief in the Gaza Strip.

Israel's Channel 13 cited a senior official as saying some of the demands presented by Hamas were not acceptable to Israel, without providing details. Israel has previously said it will not pull its troops out of Gaza until Hamas is wiped out.

According to a draft document seen by Reuters, the Hamas counterproposal envisages three phases of a truce, lasting 45 days each. Hamas would exchange remaining Israeli hostages they captured on October 7 for Palestinian prisoners. The reconstruction of Gaza would begin, Israeli forces would withdraw completely, and bodies and remains would be exchanged.

A source close to the negotiations said the Hamas counterproposal did not require a guarantee of a permanent ceasefire at the outset, but that an end

to the offensive would have to be agreed during the truce before the final hostages were freed.

"People are optimistic, at the same time they pray that this hope turns into a real agreement that will end the war," said Yamen Hamad, a father of four, living in a UN school in Deir Al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip.

- Blinken calls for more steps to bring aid into Gaza
- Death toll in enclave now 27,708
- OCHA voices alarm about looming combat in Rafah

In an update yesterday, Gaza's Health Ministry said at least 27,708 Palestinians had been confirmed killed in Israel's military campaign, with thousands more feared buried under vast tracts of rubble across the densely populated enclave. Some 123 had been killed in 24 hours, the ministry said.

After talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called for more steps to bring aid into Gaza as he met top Israeli officials.

The diplomatic push comes at a time of intense combat in Gaza, with Israel pushing to capture the main city in the south of the enclave.

Health officials in Rafah said 11 people had been killed in Israeli strikes on the town overnight, causing panic among some of the displaced people there who fear it could be the start of an Israeli assault on the area. The UN aid coordination office OCHA voiced alarm about looming major combat in the densely crowded area.

The Israeli military said it had killed dozens of Hamas members in fighting over the past 24 hours. It has made similar claims throughout the fighting in Khan Younis, which could not be independently verified.

After the outbreak of Israeli offensive in Gaza, the Lebanese-Israeli border has seen near-daily exchanges of fire between Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah.

Israeli strikes on a south Lebanon village killed one civilian and injured two others yesterday, Lebanon's state media said.

An AFP photographer in the area reported a series of strikes on Khiam, with one of his pictures showing smoke billowing from four positions in the village at once.

Since yesterday morning, Israel has struck several border villages and a water pumping station in the Wazzani plain at the border, according to the NNA.

## 1,241 BNP-Jamaat

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Investigations are going on in the cases filed between October 28, 2023, and January 7 this year, the PM said.

Responding to a question from Laxmipur-4 lawmaker Md Abdullah, the PM said over 600 vehicles were vandalised across the country after October 28, when a BNP rally in the capital ended in clashes between activists and police.

Besides, 184 buses, 48 trucks, 28 lorries, three CNG-run three-wheelers, four cars, 11 pickups, five trains, 15 motorcycles, three human hauliers, a ward councillor office, a auto rickshaw, a secondary school, 12 primary schools, four homes, a Buddhist temple, and a boat were set on fire, she said.

Drivers, helpers, policemen, BGB members, labourers, and freedom fighters were killed, injured and crippled during the blockade and hartal.

"Thirteen people died in those incidents. Nine of them were killed in the [attacks on] trains."

The country has efficient law enforcement agencies, a judicial system, and laws to identify and punish those involved in arson, vandalism, and subversive activities, the PM said.

She thanked the Election Commission, law enforcers, armed forces, public administration, and the people for conducting a free, fair and impartial election.

Bangladesh achieved success in all areas in the last 15 years because of the government's development plans, and constructive steps.

"The government is determined to continue this progress for the next five years."

No evil force can come in the way of democracy and development, she said.

As of January 28, 48 heads of state sent congratulatory messages to her, she added.

Representatives of 25 international organisations, government and non-government organisations congratulated Bangladesh for conducting a fair and participatory election.

## Silent guns unnerving

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Authorities are willing to take back their troops and officials via the waterways, and Bangladesh may not object to it.

"It is not finalised yet. We want to ensure their safety during repatriation," he added.

According to locals in Bandarban and Cox's Bazar, the districts that have borders with Myanmar's Rakhine State, the battle seemed less intense as no major explosion or gunshots were heard since Tuesday afternoon.

As the fighting went on in recent weeks, bombs, mortar shells, and bullets crossed borders, killing two people, injuring several others and damaging properties in Bangladesh.

## Myanmar issue takes centre stage

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This was the first bilateral meeting of Hasan Mahmud after he took the charge of the foreign ministry.

"The situation in Myanmar is worrying for both the countries," he said as ethnic armed groups are fighting pitched battles against the Myanmar junta that took control of the country through a coup in February 2021.

Hundreds of Myanmar military and border forces also fled the country and took shelter in India and Bangladesh.

The ways of ensuring regional political stability and peace were discussed, Hasan Mahmud told journalists after placing a wreath at the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Complex, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

"Bangladesh has achieved unprecedented development under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. India also made expansive progress under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. There are no alternatives to ensuring regional political stability and peace for continuing the upward trajectory of development," Hasan Mahmud said.

"We discussed the issue but just one meeting cannot lead to a joint action plan," he replied when asked if India and Bangladesh plan to formulate a

Shafiqul Islam, a member of Bandarban's Ghumdhum Union Parishad, said the situation was calm yesterday.

**MEETING AT FOREIGN MINISTRY**  
Representatives from the Armed Forces Division, Border Guard Bangladesh, police, Armed Police Battalion, and intelligence agencies attended the inter-ministerial meeting.

Bangladesh Ambassador to Myanmar Monwar Hossain met Myanmar Foreign Minister Than Swe and strongly protested the damage and deaths on Bangladesh territory.

BGB Director General Maj Gen Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman Siddiqui visited the borders in Tumbru and

coordinated strategy on dealing with the Myanmar crisis.

He added that the Rohingya refugee issue and their repatriation to Myanmar were also discussed at the meeting.

Hasan Mahmud emphasised on early conclusion of Teesta water-sharing agreement. He also stressed on renewal of Ganges water-sharing treaty that will expire in 2026, says a statement of the Bangladesh foreign ministry.

Here requested his Indian counterpart to withdraw tariff and non-tariff barriers for Bangladesh's exports, as well as ensure uninterrupted supply of essential commodities to Bangladesh for maintaining price stability, especially during Ramadan.

The issue of border killings was discussed and both agreed to enhanced cooperation between the two border guard forces and using non-lethal weapons to reduce border killing to zero.

India's External Affairs Minister Jaishankar emphasised on regional connectivity and power sector cooperation and stressed on devising ways and means of fast-tracking of LoC projects, the statement added.

Both foreign ministers expressed commitment to further enhance

Ghumdhum of Naikhongchhari, Bandarban.

He said BGB members were ready to deal with any situation and protect the sovereignty of their motherland while adhering to the humanitarian principles and fostering positive international relations.

Local sources said Arakan fighters were advancing towards Maungdaw from the border areas.

FDMN RC Chairman Kamal, however, thinks rebels would not make further advancement toward Maungdaw since there are several strongholds of Myanmar military and navy on the way.

their collaboration to promote sub-regional cooperation within the framework of BIMSTEC, IORA, and BBIN.

On India-Bangladesh ties, Hasan Mahmud said he would aim to expand it further in areas of connectivity, trade, business and people-to-people exchanges.

Asked if he invited Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to visit Dhaka, he said, "We would be very delighted if he can pay a visit to the country."

Dates for a possible visit to India by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina are yet to be finalised.

A press statement by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs said they reviewed the progress in bilateral relations and discussed the areas of future engagement in line with the Modi's vision of "Viksit (developed) Bharat 2047" and Hasina's "Smart Bangladesh 2041".

Hasan Mahmud invited Jaishankar to Dhaka for the next Joint Consultative Commission Meeting at his earliest convenience.

During his visit to India, he will also call on President of India Droupadi Murmu and hold a meeting with Indian Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal.

## Boy found dead day after he goes missing

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Police recovered the body of a 10-year-old boy in Aloa village under Tangail Sadar upazila yesterday, a day after he went missing.

The deceased Mohammad Rasel, was the son of Sona Miah of the village.

Family sources said Rasel went missing after he left the house on Tuesday afternoon.

Locals found his body on a dried-up bed of water body in the village the next morning and informed the matter to police.

They said there was a rope tied around his neck when his body was found.

Lokman Hossain, officer-in-charge of Tangail Sadar Police Station, said the boy's body was recovered and sent to Tangail General Hospital morgue for autopsy.

A case was being filed with the police station in this connection, he said.

## Barber stabbed to death while returning home

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

A 65-year-old barber was stabbed to death by unidentified criminals in Rangunia upazila of Chattogram early yesterday.

The deceased was identified as Santosh Kumar Shil, of Chatur Bazar under the upazila's Safarbhata union, said police.

The incident took place in the union's Khetrabazar area as Santosh was returning home after closing his salon Tuesday night, said Mirza Mohammed Hasan, officer-in-charge (OC) of South Rangunia Police Station.

Locals later found his body near his house around 1:30am and informed police.

"Santosh had multiple stab wounds to his back. His phone and cash were found next to his body."

He last spoke to his wife around 11:30pm when he told her he was coming home before his mobile phone was found switched off, added the OC.

The body has been sent to Chattogram Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy.

## 62-yr-old arrested for raping schoolgirl

UNB, Narail

Police yesterday arrested a 62-year-old man in a case filed over the rape of a fifth-grade student with Naragati Police Station in Narail.

The arrestee Mahbubur Rahman, alias Mahbub Sheikh, of Chorkhali village in Naragati, confessed to the crime during primary interrogation, said police.

He was arrested from Shuktail village in Gopalganj Sadar upazila, said Naragati Police Station Officer-in-Charge (OC) Md Mostafizur Rahman.

The victim's mother filed the case on Tuesday. According to the case, on Sunday, Mahbubur abducted the girl to his son-in-law Rana Sheikh's house and raped her there.

Hearing her screams, locals rushed to the spot while the accused fled.

She was taken to Khulna Medical College Hospital for medical attention.

Later the girl made a statement before a district court under section 22 of the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 (Amendment 2003), according to the OC.

## 28 killed in blasts

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by a device planted on motorcycle parked near the office.

It was not immediately clear who was behind the attacks. Several groups, including the Islamist militant Pakistani Taliban (TTP) and separatist groups from Balochistan, oppose the Pakistani state and have carried out attacks in recent months.

"I'm appalled by today's terrorist attacks and condemn those seeking to prevent people from voting," British High Commissioner to Pakistan Jane Marriott said.

The attacks came as political parties wrapped up their campaigning in the quiet period mandated by electoral rules the day before the election.

The US State Department has voiced apprehension over observed challenges to freedom during Pakistan's current electoral process, reports Dawn online.

Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel, in a news briefing later on Monday, affirmed, "We want to see that process take place in a way that facilitates broad participation with respect for freedom of expression, assembly, and association."

Khan, in a message from jail, earlier urged his supporters to wait outside polling booths after casting their votes, as rival political parties held large rallies to mark the end of the election campaign period.

Any large-scale gathering of Khan's supporters near booths could raise tensions because of what they call a military-backed crackdown on him and his party that has restricted campaigning. The military denies interfering in politics.

"Encourage the maximum number of people to vote, wait at the polling station ... and then stay peacefully outside the Returning Officer's office until the final results are announced," said Khan on social media platform X, accompanied by an undated photograph depicting him wearing simple black clothing.

His Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party also released a video of Khan recorded just days before he was arrested in August, calling on people to turn out to vote.

Electoral frontrunner Nawaz Sharif

led a huge rally in the eastern city of Kasur on Tuesday evening with his brother, former prime minister Shehbaz Sharif, who is running in that constituency.

Amid a sea of tens of thousands of supporters waving green party flags, Sharif called on the country's youth to support his party and took aim at Khan who has previously attracted support from young voters in the area.

"Don't fall for him," Sharif said. Supporters of the rival Pakistan People's Party also gathered in the southern city of Larkana led by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari on Tuesday evening, who could play king-maker if no one party receives enough parliamentary seats to form a government outright.

The former foreign minister and son of assassinated prime minister Benazir Bhutto criticised opponents, including Sharif, for what he described as compromising the country's security and economy during their tenures.

## Govt scales up

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installing the compressor, the production will increase," Hamid said.

Meanwhile, the country signed a supplementary deal with the International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation (ITFC) to fund the LNG purchases.

Under the new deal, the country will be able to pay up to \$500 million for importing LNG out of the \$2.1 billion short-term loan, said a press release of the ministry.

"The loan will help the country to meet the future crisis," it added.

Md Nurul Alam, secretary of the energy division, and Nazem Noordali, chief operation officer of ITFC, signed the agreement on behalf of their respective sides at the ministry.

"It's becoming harder to keep energy security stable due to the global price hike of fuel oil and gas. Initiatives to take assistance from the oil-enriched countries such as this will be continued," said Hamid, who was present at the signing ceremony.