

## INDIA ELECTION

## Huge setback for opposition INDIA bloc

Says Modi after SC verdict on VVPAT

TNN, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday said that the Supreme Court judgment on cross-verification of votes was a huge setback for opposition INDIA bloc.

Addressing a polls rally in Bihar, the Prime Minister accused the opposition of sowing doubts about the reliability of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in the minds of the people.

"Today, when the whole world is praising India's democracy, the country's election process, and the use of technology in elections, these people were busy defaming EVM for their personal interests," Modi said.

"Look at the power of the country's democracy and Baba Saheb Ambedkar's Constitution, today the Supreme Court has given such a severe blow to those who wanted to loot the ballot boxes that all their dreams have been shattered.



People travel on a boat to cast their ballot near a polling station during the second phase of voting for India's general election at Gashbari village in Darrang district of Assam state yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

**The SC granted an option to candidates to get the program of EVMs checked by engineers after results.**

Today the Supreme Court has clearly said that the old era of ballot paper will not return," he added.

Prime Minister drew a contrast between the objectives of the NDA and the INDIA bloc, asserting that while the NDA aims to empower the people, the INDIA bloc seeks to exploit the nation and its citizens for their own benefit.

Earlier yesterday, the Supreme Court rejected all petitions seeking 100 percent cross-verification of votes cast using Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) with Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips.

The SC has granted an option to candidates to get the microcontroller program of EVMs checked by a team of engineers after the declaration of results.

## It could take 14 yrs to clear debris in Gaza: UN official

REUTERS, Geneva

The vast amount of rubble including unexploded ordnance left by Israel's devastating offensive in the Gaza Strip could take about 14 years to remove, a United Nations official said yesterday.

Israel's military campaign against Gaza's ruling Palestinian group Hamas has reduced much of the narrow, coastal territory of 2.3 million people to a wasteland with most civilians homeless, hungry and at risk of disease.

Pehr Lodhammar, senior officer at the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), told a briefing in Geneva that the offensive had left an estimated 37 million tonnes of debris in the widely urbanised, densely populated territory.

He said that although it was impossible to determine the exact number of unexploded ordnance found in Gaza, it was projected that it could take 14 years under certain conditions to clear

debris, including rubble from destroyed buildings.

"We know that typically there's a failure rate of at least 10 percent of land service ammunition that is being fired and fails to function," he said. "We're

**The offensive had left an estimated 37m tonnes of debris in the densely populated territory.**

talking about 14 years of work with 100 trucks."

Meanwhile, a baby girl who was delivered from her dying mother's womb in a Gaza hospital following an Israeli airstrike has herself died after just a few days of life, the doctor who was caring for her said yesterday. The baby had been

named Rouh, meaning Soul.

Her mother, Sabreen Al-Sakani, was seriously injured when the Israeli strike hit the family home in Rafah, the southernmost city in the besieged Gaza Strip, on Saturday night.

Her husband Shukri and their three-year-old daughter Malak were killed.

Sabreen, who was 30-weeks pregnant, was rushed to the Emirati hospital in Rafah. She died of her wounds but doctors were able to save the baby, delivering her by Caesarean section.

However, the baby suffered respiratory problems and a weak immune system, said Doctor Mohammad Salama, head of the emergency neo-natal unit at Emirati Hospital, who had been caring for Rouh.

She died on Thursday and her tiny body was buried in a sandy graveyard in Rafah. "I and other doctors tried to save her, but she died. For me personally, it was a very difficult and painful day," he told Reuters by phone.

## NOVEMBER POLLS

## Biden says he's happy to debate Trump

CNN ONLINE

US President Joe Biden said he will debate former President Donald Trump ahead of this year's election, the clearest declaration yet of his willingness to face off with his Republican rival before voters cast ballots in November. Still, Biden said he didn't know yet what format the debates might take, leaving open the possibility the three traditional on-stage events could look different this year. "I am, somewhere. I don't know when," Biden said when asked by interviewer Howard Stern whether he planned to debate his predecessor. "I'm happy to debate him." It's the first time Biden has said explicitly he would debate Trump in this election cycle. Previously, he has equivocated, saying it would depend on the former president's behavior. Some of Biden's aides have questioned whether Trump would abide by established rules in any potential debate, and before Friday his campaign hadn't set out any specific debate plan. Earlier this month, a dozen of the nation's biggest news organizations posted an open letter urging Biden and Trump to participate in televised debates ahead of the 2024 election. The letter was signed by a consortium of broadcast, cable and print outlets, including ABC News, The Associated Press, CBS News, CNN, C-SPAN, Fox News, NBC News, PBS NewsHour and USA Today.

## 2 suspected rebels killed in J&K clashes

Say India police

AFP, Srinagar

Two suspected rebels were killed in Indian-administered Kashmir during a firefight, police said yesterday, the latest clash between militants and security forces in the disputed territory during ongoing national elections. The gun battle erupted late Thursday in the northern town of Sopore when police and soldiers cordoned off an area after receiving a tipoff about the presence of armed militants. A police officer told AFP that bodies of two militants had been at the site of the clash, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media. Two soldiers and a civilian also received bullet injuries, the officer added. Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since their independence in 1947, with both claiming the high-altitude territory in full but administering separate portions of it. Rebel groups have waged an insurgency in Indian-controlled Kashmir since 1989, demanding either independence or a merger with Pakistan. The conflict has left tens of thousands of civilians, soldiers and militants dead.

## Bangladeshi man shot dead by BSF

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Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), police, and family members said he was among 15-16 people who had entered India to bring cattle.

Nurul Amin said a letter was sent to BSF in the morning protesting the incident and a flag meeting was called.

Quoting Abul's associates, the BGB official said Abul was brought back to Bangladesh in critical condition. He died soon after being admitted to Patgram Upazila Health Complex.

Patgram OC Abu Saeed Chowdhury told The Daily Star police recovered the body from the upazila health complex in the morning and sent it to Lalmonirhat Sadar Hospital morgue for post-mortem.

## Good yields

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This year, 2,23,407 hectares have come under Boro cultivation, 162 hectares beyond the target, the DAE data show.

The DAE expected that production would exceed the target of 13,70,200 tonnes of paddy.

Abdul Karim, another farmer of Dekhar Haor, said, "I grew Boro paddy on five acres of land. In the last couple of years, my crop was damaged by flash floods, but the sunny weather brought me good luck this season."

While most farmers are happy with the yield, a few are struggling to get labour to harvest the crop.

Abdul Gofur, of Sunamganj's Jagannathpur upazila, said, "Usually 50 labourers from Sirajganj come to harvest paddy in my village every year. But this time they did not come, leaving us in a crisis of labour. As it is drizzling sometimes, combine harvesters don't work properly on muddy fields."

According to the DAE, around 1,000 combine harvesters are employed to harvest paddy along with about 120 reaper machines.

Contacted, Bimol Chandra Shom, deputy director of the DAE in Sunamganj, said, "The labour shortage is temporary as most farmers want to harvest their produce as early as possible. We are hopeful that the harvest will be completed by May 3."

## Mutual interests may

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"Qatar can think of Bangladesh as an important ally, knowing its growing capacity," he said.

In a strategic relationship, two countries engage not only in trade and economic sectors but also in defence, security, investments and other areas in the international forums where their interests converge.

The visit by the Qatar emir on April 22-23 came a year after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Doha.

The two leaders discussed the Gaza war and called for the global leaders to take effective measures for a durable solution to the Palestinian crisis. They also talked about the repatriation of the Rohingyas.

On the trade front, the bilateral meeting in Dhaka discussed expediting collaboration on trade and investment, energy and power, manpower, defence, education, maritime security, port management, agriculture and food security and resulted in ten deals.

Deals have been also agreed on how to avoid double taxation on goods, prevent fiscal evasion, cooperation in the legal field, youth and sports, diplomatic training and establish the Bangladesh-Qatar joint business council to boost bilateral trade, which now stands at more than \$3.5 billion, with Bangladesh importing some \$2.70 billion worth of LNG, fertiliser and other petroleum products.

They also discussed the welfare of nearly 4 lakh Bangladeshi workers in the Gulf nation.

"If you notice, Qatar has taken an integrated approach to enhance the economic, diplomatic and political relationships," said Prof Shahab Enam.

"The emir visited all the three Asian countries -- Bangladesh, Philippines and Nepal -- that have large numbers of people working in Qatar. There are security dynamics at play here," he said.

Qatar does not want extremist elements in its workforce, he added. Prof Delwar Hossain of the International Relations Department at Dhaka University told The Daily Star that the signing of the new deals has given the already good bilateral relationship a stronger institutional framework.

He mentioned that due to both nations' efforts to expand their trade

and investments and their diplomatic influence, their bilateral relations have the potential to thrive.

Bangladesh's growing interest in the Indian Ocean region is also something that Qatar has an interest in -- call it port management, shipping or energy, he said.

"The visit by the Qatar emir demonstrates high-level political will and now the concerned officials need to follow up and implement the ideas mooted efficiently," Prof Delwar said.

And the sentiment is mutual.

On Tuesday, Qatari newspaper Peninsula Qatar reported that the relations between Bangladesh and Qatar witnessed remarkable development in recent years through mutual visits at various levels and fruitful cooperation.

This "reflects the keenness of the leadership of the two countries to develop these relations and advance them into strategic partnerships and further progress and prosperity".

## Egypt sends

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reassessing its role.

The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said yesterday that at least 34,356 people have been killed in the territory during more than six months of offensive. The tally includes at least 51 deaths in the past 24 hours, a ministry statement said.

The Pentagon said Thursday that the US military had begun construction of a "temporary pier" off Gaza's coast to boost shipments of desperately needed aid.

## BNP expels 73

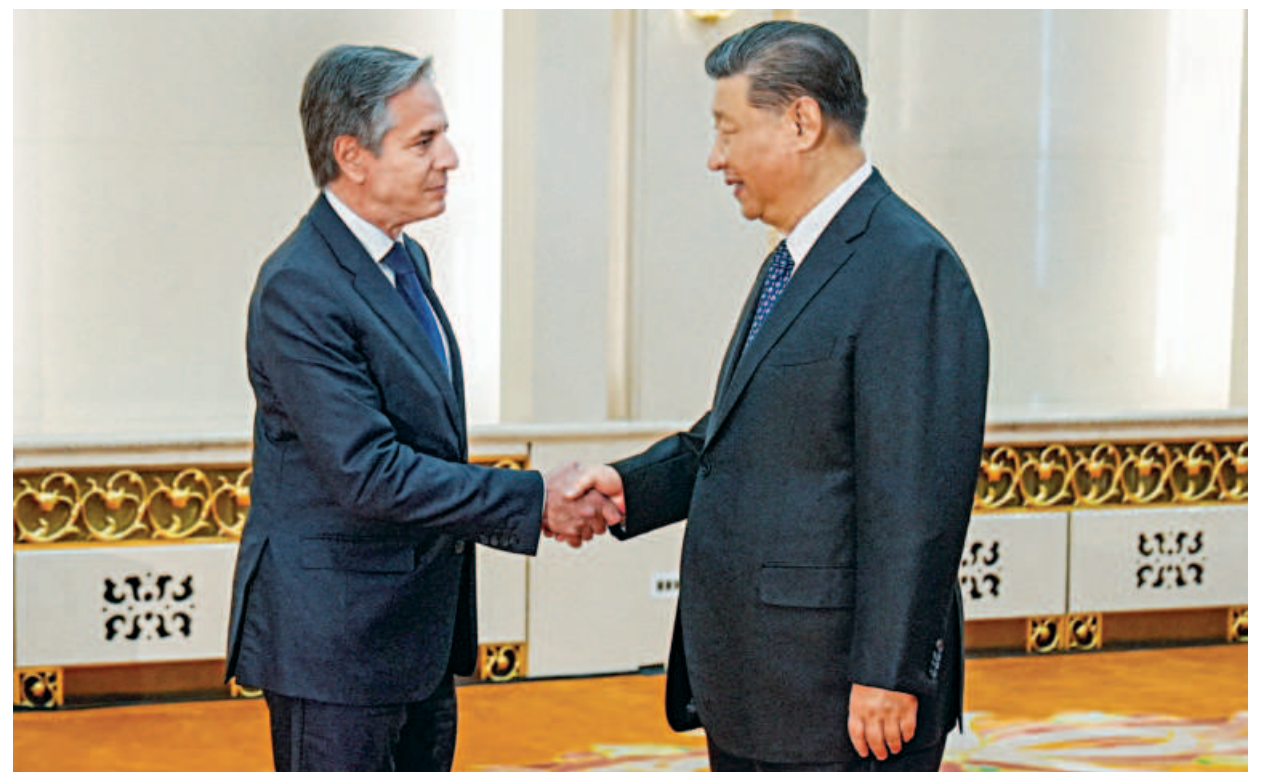
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the morale of the party's grassroots and step up organisational activities.

A BNP leader, wishing not to be named, yesterday said the ruling Awami League will benefit if the BNP allows its leaders to run in the polls.

To show the elections competitive, the ruling party did not nominate anyone for upazila chairman posts so that others take part in the polls, he added.

The BNP earlier had expelled some leaders for participating in the January 7 parliamentary polls.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People, in Beijing, China yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## US, China should be 'partners, not rivals'

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But Blinken sounded a warning on China's support for Russia's "brutal war of aggression" in Ukraine, saying that Beijing -- while stopping short of direct arms exports -- has helped Russia ramp up production of rockets, drones and tanks. Russian President Vladimir Putin said this week he will visit China in May.

"Russia would struggle to sustain

its assault on Ukraine without China's support," Blinken said, warning that the United States was ready to take action against Beijing if it does not take action itself.

But he said China has been helpful in the past, including in discouraging nuclear weapons use by Russia, and said that Wang promised to stay in touch on the Middle East, a key priority for Washington.

Pointing to China's ties with Iran,

whose shadow war with Israel has come into the open, Blinken said: "I think the relationships that China has can be positive in trying to calm tensions, to prevent escalation, avoid the spread of the conflict."

US officials and experts believe that Xi's foremost priority is to manage headwinds in the Chinese economy and that, at least in the short term, he is looking to avoid flare-ups with the West.

## Sweltering heat to continue for few more

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northeastern and southeastern part of the country on Tuesday, it added.

The government has decided to reopen all secondary schools, colleges, madrasas, and technical education institutions from Sunday amid the ongoing heatwave.

Yesterday, the lowest temperature of 20.6 degrees Celsius was recorded in Tetulia of Panchagarh, the bulletin added.

People, especially those who belong to low-income groups like day-labourers and rickshaw pullers, are

in dire straits due to the continuous intense heat.

"It appears that my skin is getting burnt by sun rays when I drive my vehicle. That is why, I cannot operate it for a long time amid such extreme heatwave," said Mustafizur Rahman, a battery-run auto-rickshaw driver at Damurhuda bus stand area in Chuadanga.

"I'm the lone earning member in my family. We'll have to starve, if I cannot earn. So, I am compelled to go out of home for work defying such scorching heat," said Md.

Kamal Hossain, a rickshaw puller at Pabna's Ishwardi upazila where the temperature was recorded 42.4 degrees Celsius yesterday afternoon.

"Life has become unbearable due to such blistering heat. We don't know how long we will survive amid such a condition," said cobbler Bimol Sutradhar, who runs his business on a footpath at Dhaka's Bailey Road area.

[Our correspondent from Pabna and a correspondent from Chuadanga contributed to this report]