

## Level playing field still elusive ahead of polls

Says Jamaat ameer

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Chattogram

J a m a a t - e - Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman yesterday said that the political environment in the run-up to the national election is not congenial, warning that any delay beyond February in holding the polls could trigger a national crisis.

“There is no level playing field in the election. But we have to create it ourselves, so be prepared. If this election is not held by February, the country will face a crisis,” said Shafiqur, while talking to journalists at Chawkbazar Parade Ground in Chattogram city in the afternoon.

In response to a question, he said, “If the referendum is held on election day, there is a possibility of an electoral genocide.”

Clarifying Jamaat’s position on the PR (proportional representation) issue, Shafiqur said, “Our demand

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Palestinians inspect the site of an Israeli strike in Gaza City yesterday. Israeli airstrikes in Gaza killed at least 14 people and wounded several others, local health authorities said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## DU closed for 2 weeks to assess tremor risks

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Students explained that they moved into the unused flats out of fear, accusing the university of ignoring long-standing warnings about unsafe hall conditions.

“This has been a problem for years,” said third-year student Md Ramzan, who shifted his belongings from the hall to the staff quarters around 11:30pm. “We protested even six months ago, but nobody cared. After the earthquake, it became a matter of life and death. We are not here permanently, we only want the authorities to finally fix our hall.”

Fourth-year student Robiul Islam described their daily anxiety. “While you sleep, the ceiling could fall on your head. If staff have these comfortable flats, why must we live with such uncertainty, especially when many of them rent out their allotted houses instead of living in them?”

A DU press release yesterday said all classes and examinations will remain suspended until December 6, and all residential halls must be vacated for a comprehensive post-earthquake inspection, risk assessment, and renovation.

“The Syndicate meeting considered the physical and mental distress students suffered due to the recent earthquake and aftershocks, and prioritised their overall safety,” the notice said.

The Syndicate also noted that expert opinions from Buet engineers, the Planning and Development Office director, and the chief engineer were reviewed. Their assessment concluded that a thorough inspection of all halls is essential to evaluate structural risks and determine necessary repairs.

Jagannath University Vice-Chancellor Prof Rezaul Karim said, “Repeated earthquakes in the capital have created widespread anxiety among students and others on campus. Therefore, we are suspending all classes and examinations only for Sunday.”

He said activities related to the JnUCSU election will continue as scheduled.

Two earthquakes were felt yesterday, marking three tremors in just 32 hours. The powerful quake killed 10 people in several parts of the country, including Dhaka.

### 7 HURT IN ALIA MADRASA CLASH

Meanwhile, seven students were injured in a clash between two groups at Alia Madrasa in Dhaka’s Bakshibazar last night.

The injured are Sadiq, 21, Moin, 22, Elias, 21, Omar Faruk, 21, Abu Bakr, 22, Walid, 22, and Enamul, 22.

All of them were admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, police said.

The incident occurred around 10:00pm. Police first respondent to the scene and later army personnel were deployed to bring the situation under control.

Inspector Md Faruk, in-charge of the DMCH police outpost, told The Daily Star, “A milad mahfil was being held inside the madrasa. During the event, a verbal altercation broke out between two groups of students, which eventually escalated into a clash.”

“All seven injured students came in with head injuries. However, they did not provide details about the exact cause behind the altercation,” he added.

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is completed, the detailing must also be done properly. This is often where major negligence occurs. Sometimes the design is done correctly, but the reinforcement is not placed as detailed in the drawings,” he added.

Prof Mehedi Ahmed Ansary of BUET’s civil engineering department stressed that damaged buildings must be examined immediately and prioritised based on risk.

“Some buildings have column damage, others none. We need clear segmentation to decide what must be done first,” he said.

He warned that a stronger earthquake could cause far more devastating collapses. “If we act now, we can prevent greater losses.”

He suggested Rajuk issue notices or newspaper advertisements instructing homeowners to assess their buildings and submit reports. Experts could then guide the next steps.

Although the number of visibly damaged structures remains limited, he said many across Dhaka likely suffered some degree of structural impact.

### DAMAGED BUILDINGS

Near Mitali Bidyapith in Swamibagh, a small crowd of curious onlookers gathered yesterday morning around a building that had tilted into the neighbouring one after Friday’s quake.

One observer, teenager Jishan Alam, said he had come to see the slanting structure in person after hearing of its condition.

It was clearly visible that the eight storey building at 52/1 Mitali School Road had leaned against its neighbour, its sixth and seventh floors pressing into the adjoining structure.

Saiful Islam, the building manager, told The Daily Star he was not present during the incident. The owner was abroad, he said, and tenants

continued to live inside.

A similar situation unfolded in Khilgaon’s Sipahibag area, where two five-storey buildings stand side by side at the Tempo Stand intersection.

There, Ruhul Manjil appeared to have tilted after the quake, leaving only a narrow gap between the structures. Locals reported cracks inside, and residents watched nervously from their windows.

At midday yesterday, the Shwapno outlet on Ruhul Manjil’s ground floor remained closed.

Across the road, Sayem Enterprise, a mobile phone shop, also shuttered after cracks formed in its walls. Its AC unit fell during the tremor.

The shop’s owner, Md Belayet Hossain, said the building had been designed for four storeys, but a fifth was added later without following approved plans.

The building’s owner declined to comment.

While inspecting sites, Rajuk Chairman Riazul warned that the Armanitola building, where three people died when a rooftop brick railing collapsed, could be sealed if design and approval documents were not submitted within seven days.

In Mugda, he and his team inspected a building leaning onto its neighbour. Shops on the ground floors of both structures were ordered closed, and owners were instructed to submit design documents within a week. He also ordered the removal of illegal food stalls encroaching on the footpath.

At Badda Alatunnessa School and College, he inspected three buildings. Two had column cracks; he ordered design submissions and directed steps for removing the unsafe structures. Academic activities were temporarily suspended.

Riazul added that Old Dhaka remained particularly vulnerable, with many multi-storey buildings erected without approvals.

## Experts flag underground stress

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Another highly active zone is the Dauki fault, linked to several large earthquakes. Experts believe it ruptured three times in the last millennium, in 840, 920, and 1548.

The Great Assam Earthquake of 1897 shook the Indian subcontinent, including parts of Dhaka. More than a century later, scientists warn the region is overdue for another major event.

Dhaka remains deeply vulnerable because of its geology, density, and high economic exposure.

Smaller tremors are common. In the last decade, 583 earthquakes of magnitude 4 or above have struck within 300km of Bangladesh, an average of 58 a year, or four a month. On average, a quake occurs near Bangladesh every six days.

Experts say such smaller events can signal the build-up to a larger quake in regions with active faults such as the Dauki fault or the Indo-Burma subduction zone.

Prof Mehedi Ahmed Ansary of Buet’s civil engineering department told The Daily Star that the return period for a magnitude 7 quake in the region is 125 to 175 years, and for

a magnitude 8 quake, 250 to 300 years.

He said the timings of past major quakes, from the 8.5-magnitude Chittagong earthquake of 1762 to the 7.6-magnitude Sreemangal quake of 1918 and the 7.1-magnitude Dhubri quake of 1930, must be considered when assessing current risk.

“I think these earthquakes are foreshocks of a bigger one. We must be prepared for that,” he said of the tremors felt on Friday and yesterday.

As one of the world’s most densely populated cities, Dhaka is dangerously ill-prepared. If Friday’s quake had been magnitude 7, Prof Ansary warned, casualties could have reached three lakh, and 35 percent of the city would have been destroyed.

“So we need to start checking our buildings according to the building code,” he said.

He suggested classifying every building in Dhaka using a colour code – green for structures built safely and according to code, yellow or orange for those at risk and in need of strengthening, and red for buildings that must be evacuated immediately.

Rajuk Chief Engineer Md Nurul Islam told The Daily Star that in Old Dhaka, the damaged parts were mostly those that deviated from approved designs.

### NO ACTION ON RISKY BUILDINGS

In 2022, the Rajuk identified 42 buildings in Dhaka, Gazipur, and Narayanganj as being at immediate risk and ordered them vacated and demolished within three months. It also listed 187 structures requiring retrofitting. Most have seen no progress.

The high-risk buildings belong to several government and autonomous bodies, including the Education Engineering Department, Department of Health Education, LGED, Jagannath University, Dhaka University, Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board, the Institute of Leather Technology, and the Bangladesh Medical University hospital. They were flagged during a survey of 3,252 structures under the Urban Resilience Project.

Asked about these buildings, the Rajuk chairman said most were government-owned, and that a citywide reassessment was essential.

He said risky buildings were now being listed, sealed, or cleared as needed.

“This earthquake is a major warning. Science suggests a bigger shock may be ahead,” he said.

He added that the work must be collaborative, involving Rajuk, city corporations, disaster management authorities, the army, and the fire service.

“We are disconnecting the utility meters of those constructing illegally. Some keep constructing using stolen meters or generators,” Riazul said.

He urged owners to consider demolishing unsafe or ageing structures on small plots and then rebuilding jointly. “Combining plots may mean short-term losses, but it brings long-term benefits.”

It has been done in the US, Japan, and India, he said, adding that after the Rana Plaza disaster, Bangladesh implemented a similar process for the garments sector.

## Prepare for referendum

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Referring to the high public expectations over the election, he said, “In the past two to three days, I have realised how great those expectations are. This is extremely challenging for us. Whatever challenges lie ahead, our main goal is to deliver a transparent election to the nation. We have given this assurance to the political parties as well.”

The CEC said that, no matter how challenging it may be, the Commission will hold the referendum and the national election on the same day.

“We have no option but to move forward,” he said. “We have received the letter to organise the referendum. Once the law is enacted, we will be able to say how the referendum will be conducted.”

## Rethink strategy

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The aim, he said, was fairer access to trade, technology and capital, but little changed and Western dominance carried into the 21st century.

“We are living in a world now in which the balance of power is relocating itself towards the Global South, and within the Global South, to its epicentre within the Asian region – particularly in South, Southeast, and East Asia.”

He noted that while the United States still has the largest GDP in nominal terms, China is second and India is fast catching up. By purchasing power parity, China is already the largest economy and India the third.

“If you project forward to 2050, the available projections indicate that, even in nominal terms, China will be the largest global economy, India will be third, and interestingly, Indonesia will be the fourth largest economy in the world.”

These shifts, he said, result from changes in trade, capital flows and technology. China is now the world’s largest exporter, and East Asia as a region trades more than the European Union.

“China has now become the largest trading partner of East and Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, Africa and [major countries in] Latin America.

“These are the emerging objective facts of the global system, which are increasingly defining relations.”

Prof Sobhan warned that Bangladesh’s continued focus on the US garment market and duty-free privileges in the European Union reflects “yesterday’s strategies.”

“Despite its flaws and historical scars, the present constitution remains the judiciary’s only touchstone of legitimacy.”

– Chief Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed



He said Bangladesh has duty-free access to India and China but has “neither diversified nor developed working arrangements” to enter their supply chains.

Calling on policymakers and the private sector to move beyond the “LDC cocoon”, he said, “If we want to reposition ourselves in the global system, we need to have smarter and more dynamic policymakers. We need to also have a much more adventurous and creative private sector....”

Earlier, at the inauguration, Chief Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed said the July uprising did not seek to overturn the constitution but aimed to purify engagement with it by restoring transparency, accountability and responsiveness.

“The uprising forced Bangladesh to revisit the very grammar of its constitutional life, reminding every organ of the state that the rule of law is the moral architecture that secures legitimacy.”

He said the judiciary, as the only fully functioning constitutional organ during the transitional months, had to remain humble in its limits while ensuring that “no right is rendered illusory, no institution made captive, and no citizen abandoned”.

He added that last year’s structural initiatives were “constitutional correctives” aimed at strengthening judicial independence and balance.

Warning that reform is not guaranteed, he said future Supreme Court administrations may face a constitutional landscape different

from today’s. “Despite its flaws

and historical scars, the present constitution remains the judiciary’s only touchstone of legitimacy.”

Also at the inaugural session, Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain said Bangladesh chooses to be “an active, sovereign and responsible player” in a time of global realignment.

“States may be tempted to pick sides, but Bangladesh should first pick the right course.

“We will engage robustly, speak firmly when needed, and partner productively always with an eye on national interest and regional stability.”

He highlighted the shifting power, fragmentation of stability, weaponisation of knowledge, economic realignment and climate, borders and security.

At the Speed Talk segment, economist Debapriya Bhattacharya said Bangladesh is now dealing with three objectives: justice, reforms and inclusion, and that reforms connect the other two.

Referring to the White Paper he led, he said governance trends created three narrow groups – politicians, businessmen and bureaucrats – who avoided competition and produced crony capitalism, kleptocracy and oligarchs.

Debapriya said Bangladesh must break this “anti-reform coalition.” “Designing reform is easy, but delivering reform is one of the toughest.... Reforms must be coherent, politically grounded and visible to citizens, and should continue beyond any single government.”

Editor and Publisher of The Daily Star Mahfuz Anam said Bangladesh

## Voters still unclear about referendum

Says Fakhrul

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday said people have yet to understand the issue of the referendum and PR system.

Addressing a discussion at the Diploma Engineers Institution’s multipurpose hall in Dhaka’s Kakrail, he said, “People in Bangladesh understand ‘one man, one vote’. A person contests elections, there is a symbol, and voters cast their ballots accordingly – that is what we have followed since the beginning. Now they want to change that and hold a referendum.”

“A referendum means a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ choice. But now they say there will be four questions on one ballot. People haven’t understood anything yet. They probably won’t understand even by the last day,” he said.

Fakhrul said one political party had been “shouting” for PR, claiming elections would not be held without it.

“They made a lot of noise. But now their tone has softened. We are seeing hectic lobbying everywhere for the election. This is not right. People should be guided properly toward what they are being asked to accept.”



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