

Sharsha: waiting for the border to breathe again

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Trade has slowed, travel has shrunk, and uncertainty hangs heavy over border communities. In places like Sharsha, where livelihoods are tightly bound to cross-border movement, diplomacy is not an abstract concept. It is real-life encounters.

Kashipur, a frontier village in Sharsha upazila, lies about an hour's drive from Jashore town. By the time I reached its bazar around midday, the place felt subdued, reflecting its remoteness and unease. At a tin shed tea stall beside a three-wheeler stand, I sat with a shopkeeper, a farmer, a tempo driver and a meat seller, men whose fortunes rise and fall with the border to a large extent.

"What happens at the border affects us in ways people in Dhaka don't understand," said Anisur Rahman, 55, a lifelong resident. He spoke wistfully of a childhood when crossing into Indian villages like Boyra and Kulanandapur was casual, almost instinctive. "We moved freely then. No fear," he said.

That freedom has steadily disappeared, especially after India erected the border fence roughly 25 years ago. Today, even approaching the border pillars feels dangerous. "Farmers are afraid of being shot by the BSE," Anisur said. "Now it is unthinkable to go close."

While villagers in Kashipur may not follow geopolitics, they feel its consequences acutely. Trade, both formal and informal, has slowed, and prices have climbed. Tariqul Islam, a tempo driver, said a tyre that cost Tk 3,200 a year ago now sells for Tk 5,500. Fertiliser prices have risen from around Tk 1,200 to Tk 1,800 a sack.

"This is largely linked to India," he said simply.

Yet views in Kashipur are not uniform. Karimul Sheikh, a farmer and local BNP leader who joined the conversation, was surprisingly unfazed by the strained relationship.

"Let relations be bad for a while," he said with a shrug. "It's better if rice and onions stop coming from India."

His reasoning was bluntly economic. Imported rice, he argued, depresses prices for local farmers. Onion imports, too, have long distorted the market.

"Whenever prices rose, India stopped exports, and prices would skyrocket," he said. "We once bought onions at Tk 200 a kilo. Now, even without imports, you can buy them at Tk 50. Farmers here have started growing onions themselves."

"India doesn't want us anyway," Karimul added. "If one side doesn't want a relationship, what can the other do?"

Asked what he expects from the next government, his answer was modest.

"We want to live in peace," he said. "No government can fulfil everyone's demands. Not even families can."

But one demand was non-negotiable: the vote.

"We couldn't vote for 17 years," he said. "This time we will."

Nowhere is the diplomatic chill more visible than at Benapole, Bangladesh's largest land port and busiest crossing with India. In normal times, thousands of people cross here daily. When I reached around 3:00pm, the area outside the immigration and customs buildings felt eerily empty.

Porters in red shirts sat idle on the pavement. Md Shajahan, one of them, said his earnings have collapsed over the past few months.

"India isn't issuing visas," he said. "Hardly 500 people cross now. Before, it was thousands every day."

Nearby, Md Rafiqul Islam, who runs Shantu Enterprise, a clearing

live or six now operate on a good day.

For Rafiqul, the solution is unmistakably political.

"Nothing will improve without an election," he said. "Whoever wins, an elected government is the only way out." That sentiment was echoed by Nazrul Islam, a businessman in Benapole, though with sharper language.

"We want a Bangladesh where India does not interfere or intimidate," he said. "We in border areas may endure hardship, but we don't want India frowning at us anymore."

Yet the cost of prolonged tension is undeniable. Transport companies, clearing agents, hotels, restaurants and car rental services across Benapole depend on smooth cross-border movement. For them, de-escalation is not ideological. It is existential.

On my way back from Benapole to Jashore, our vehicle was stopped at an army checkpoint. Soldiers were



In Kashipur, a frontier village in Sharsha upazila, many people's fortunes rise and fall with the border.

and forwarding agency next to the immigration office, described the downturn in stark numbers.

"Earlier, 1,200 to 1,400 trucks entered from India every day," he said. "Now it's barely 200 to 250."

The collapse began around eight months ago and has only worsened. With visas suspended, importers cannot even travel to India to negotiate deals.

"Look around," Rafiqul said, gesturing at the empty compound. "There used to be crowds here from morning till night."

Bus services have suffered the same fate. Where dozens of coaches once ran daily between Benapole and Dhaka, only

inspecting nearly every passing car, a visible sign that election-related security preparations are finally underway. For many traders in Benapole, the sight was perhaps quietly reassuring.

In Benapole and Kashipur, politics is not debated through manifestos and speeches. It is measured in border fences, idle porters, empty bus terminals, rising prices and the long wait for normalcy. People here are pinning their hopes on a fair and peaceful election and a transition to an elected government that might finally allow the frontier to breathe again.(Shakeel Anwar is a former BBC journalist)

Insane bounty for bureaucrats

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health budget for the current fiscal year. The disparity in priorities is glaring: while the health sector fought to secure a nominal increase of just Tk 501 crore – a pittance in real terms – the bureaucracy is eyeing a windfall. The scale of the distortion is equally visible elsewhere: the pay hike is equivalent to almost half (44 percent) of the total Annual Development Programme and would devour a fifth of the government's operating expenditure.

The pay hike is a contradiction in terms for a government committed to a "contractionary" budget. The ADP has already been trimmed by 13.2 percent to lower the deficit.

The verdict from Bangladesh Bank Governor Ahsan H Mansur was unsparring. He told business leaders at an event yesterday that the salary hike would compel the state to borrow heavily from banks. "Is that going to help reduce inflation? No," he said. Taming prices to the desired level, he warned, would remain a distant dream.

The financing options range from the improbable to the disastrous. The National Board of Revenue (NBR) posted 14 percent growth in collection in the first half of the fiscal year, but still missed its target by Tk 46,000 crore.

With the tax-to-GDP ratio languishing at historic lows, a revenue-funded solution seems fanciful – an irony seemingly lost on the pay commission's chief, Zakir Ahmed Khan, who is himself a former chairman of the revenue board.

As Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist at the World Bank's Dhaka

office, points out, financing recurring expenditures through debt is economic heresy.

"Where will the money come from?" he says.

The government cannot print money without fuelling the very inflation it seeks to quash. Foreign agencies do not lend for public sector salaries. And heavy borrowing from the banking sector would crowd out private sector credit growth, which is already subdued at 6.58 percent.

It will further stifle the job creation needed for unemployed graduates.

MK Mujeri, a former director general of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, argues that the economy is simply not ready. The government's debt dependency is already creating risks; adding a permanent trillion taka obligation is reckless. He suggests a dearness allowance would have been a prudent stopgap, rather than a full blown pay commission, which has now raised expectations that the exchequer cannot meet.

There is also the question of equity. Dr Itteharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), brands the proposal as "not implementable."

In a country facing money scarcity, he argues, the burden of bureaucratic enrichment will ultimately fall on the general public through higher inflation and taxes.

The common refrain that higher pay reduces corruption is, in his view, a fallacy.

Historical data suggest the rate

the victim card" but to issue a warning over the repeated attacks on candidates and campaigners of the II-party "Oikoboddho Bangladesh" alliance.

"If an attack takes place, there will be a counter-attack. If the Election Commission remains silent and if the police remain inactive, then we will do what is necessary from our side."

Nahid spoke of a similar incident a day earlier in Dhaka-18, where their alliance candidate Ariful Islam Adeb and his supporters were allegedly attacked. He also claimed that over the past few days, women campaigners affiliated with the female wing of the Jamaat were attacked in around six to seven districts.

According to him, the incidents showed a pattern of targeting the alliance candidates and campaigners, particularly young candidates and women.

Referring to the throwing of eggs at candidates, which he said occurred in Dhaka-8 and other areas, Nahid said, "If eggs are thrown at candidates of one party, candidates of the other party will face the same fate.

"We don't want such an environment. We want a politics of harmony, having fought the anti-fascist movement

together. But today, one side is using Awami League-style tactics to humiliate its rival candidates."

The NCP leader also alleged that while an alliance was being allowed to campaign freely, often in violation of the electoral code of conduct, candidates and activists of their alliance were being targeted elsewhere. "This has made it clear that there is no level playing field."

He further alleged that since BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman's return home, they have been hearing of a plan which, judging by recent incidents, appears to involve attacking and humiliating candidates of other alliances, obstructing campaigns, pressuring the EC and the media, making the election one-sided, capturing polling centres, and controlling the results.

"If there is such a plan, it will be settled on February 12."

Mahdi Amin, spokesperson for BNP's Central Election Steering Committee, rejected Nahid's claims.

In a Facebook post, he said, linking Tarique's name to any incident without any evidence is a reflection of a fascist culture.

ANFREL deploys

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public confidence in the electoral process, and compliance with the legal framework.

The observers will also monitor election day and post-election processes, including polling operations, vote counting, and the announcement of results.

The mission includes a social media monitoring component, conducted in partnership with The Carter Center, to examine online electoral discourse and the Election Commission's response to election-related content in the digital space.

ANFREL said its methodology is based on internationally recognised principles of election observation and builds on a pre-election assessment mission conducted in Bangladesh in November-December 2025.

ANFREL's observers will take part in a two-day briefing workshop in Dhaka on February 6-7.

The mission will issue an interim report with preliminary findings and immediate recommendations on February 15, accompanied by a press briefing in Dhaka, and publish a comprehensive final report after the mission concludes.

Leadership change

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"There is no alternative to electing honest, just and principle-based leadership. A single vote in favour of Islam means taking one step forward towards building a justice-based state. With every additional vote for the hand fan symbol, the strength of Islam will increase," he said.

At a rally in Delduar, Akhinur Mia, the IAB candidate for Tangail-6, said, "If I am elected MP, the long cherished dreams of this region will be fulfilled, In Sha Allah [God willing]. I will not engage in corruption, nor will I allow anyone else to do so."

Mabbubur Rahman, a presidium member of the party, said the core theme of Islami Andolan's manifesto is building a Bangladesh that reflects public aspirations. The manifesto emphasises the supremacy of Shariah, employment for youth, and a job-oriented education system, he added.

Among others, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Maruf, central publicity and dawah secretary of Islami Andolan, and Hossein Ibn Sarwar, central vice-president of the party's student wing, also addressed the rallies.

‘We seek no conflict, but will defend ourselves’

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"Those who sincerely seek reform will find us by their side. Today, the youth have united against both old and new forms of fascism. Already, students from five public universities have made their stance clear," he said while addressing a rally at the Sathkira Government High School ground in the afternoon.

The Jamaat chief said two votes would be held on February 12 – one in favour of reform through a "yes" ballot and the other for a new Bangladesh.

He told the rally that a "yes" vote meant freedom, while a "no" vote meant slavery.

"Entering the booth, voters must first firmly cast 'yes'. If 'yes' wins, Bangladesh wins. Fascism will not return, and the corrupt and extortionists will be buried.

Govt lenience fuelling mobs

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phone calls to mobilise help but it did not arrive in time, Kabir said: "My witness is the Prime Minister's press secretary himself. If the chief adviser's press secretary cannot get help when major media houses are under attack, it means the government allowed this to happen."

Journalism in a democratic society must remain inherently critical of power, said Kabir, also the editor of the daily New Age.

"Press freedom is not for journalists – it is for the people," he said, adding that journalism enables public opinion to exert democratic pressure between elections.

The implementation of the Wage Board was not only the government's responsibility but also that of media owners. He called for transparency and a code of conduct for both journalists and owners.

Media Reform Commission Chief Kamal Ahmed warned that the government's planned Broadcast Commission Ordinance and Media Commission Ordinance could create serious regulatory conflicts due to overlapping authorities.

The television licensing authority already exists under the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC). If the BTRC remains and another broadcast commission is formed, there will be constant conflict over whose decision will prevail.

"If the Press Council is kept and a media commission is also formed, there will be the same kind of overlap and conflict," said Ahmed, also the consulting editor of The Daily Star.

Such duplication would undermine reform efforts, he said, adding that the Media Reform Commission had deliberately avoided proposing overlapping powers and instead proposed editorial oversight and grievance mechanisms.

Referring to the government's recent rush to issue ordinances, he said: "This government is at its final stage, and suddenly it has become very active."

The ordinances would still require validation by the next parliament.

"If things are done through patchwork, it can create a dangerous

situation in the future."

He also reiterated that financial insecurity poses a threat to press freedom.

"If journalists are not financially independent, they cannot work independently," he said.

Although the chief adviser talks about 'three zeros', in reality, he sees only emptiness around him, said Zillur Rahman, the president of CGS.

A government representative refused to use the term 'mobs' claiming it would be an insult to the mass uprising, he said, while raising questions about media freedom in such a situation.

"There is no real vote in the country; what exists is referendum campaigning – government campaigning through government offices, with 'Referendum 2026' above 'parliamentary election,'" said Rahman, also the host of the long running talk show Tritiyo Matra.

Dhaka University Professor SM Shamim Reza stressed the need to identify gaps between media and the public, and addressed journalist pay, protection laws, Press Council effectiveness and safe work environments.

Robaet Ferdous, a professor at Dhaka University's department of mass communication, emphasised the role of courage and critical thinking in media and democracy.

Ayesha Kabir, head of Prothom Alo English, called for gender inclusivity.

"Women's participation in media must increase to build an equitable state," she added.

Journalists must secure their own independence, as those in power often seek flattery, said Shakhawat Hossain Sayantha, general secretary of political research organisation G9.

He called for vigilance in preventing the spread of misinformation before elections via AI-generated videos and edited photos.

Sajedul Huq Rubel, central committee member of the Communist Party of Bangladesh; Bazlur Rashid Firoz, general secretary of the Socialist Party of Bangladesh; Dhaka Tribune Editor Reaz Ahmad; Senior Journalist Zahid Newaz Khan; and Bangladesh Pratidin Executive Editor AKM Monjurul Islam spoke at the event among others.

dignity. We have kept that promise. We will not seize anyone's property, and we will not engage in extortion."

Addressing party activists, he said, "Each of you must protect the voting rights of every man and woman. Voters will cast their votes wherever they choose, but we want to ensure that they reach the ballot box safely."

Shafiqur said Bangladesh did not belong to Muslims alone, although Muslims were the majority. "This country is a garden of flowers where people of other communities live together. No one will be able to look at them with ill intent, and no hand will be raised against them."

[Our correspondents from Khulna, Bagerhat, and Benapole contributed to the report.]

Sirajganj 250 Bed General Hospital, said resident medical officer Dr Shimul Talukdar.

No case was filed in this connection till filing of this report yesterday evening, said Sirajganj Sadar OC Md Shahidul Islam.

In Patuakhali, at least three were injured in a clash between supporters of BNP alliance-backed candidate for Patuakhali-3 Nurul Haq Nur and his opponent Hasan Mamun, BNP's rebel candidate who was expelled by the party, on Monday night.

Locals and witnesses said Mamun's supporters at a campaign office in the Paglabazar area under Dashmina upazila came under attack by some 20-25 supporters of Nur, triggering the clash around 8:00pm.

The injured received treatment at Dashmina Upazila Health Complex, said the hospital's doctor Mostafizur Rahman.

Contacted, Nur, also president of Gono Odhikar Parishad, denied the allegations and claimed his supporters were not involved in any such incident.

No case was filed till filing of this report yesterday evening, said Dashmina OC Md Hasnain Parvez.

[Our correspondents from Netrakona, Shariatpur, Narayanganj, Pabna and Patuakhali contributed to the report.]

of the crowd, his vehicle was delayed in reaching the venue.

"Will you allow vote robbery this time?" he asked at the rally.

The attendees replied, "No".

The BNP chief also promised that if the party comes to power, an overpass will be built over the Joydebpur rail crossing, day-care centres will be set up for the children of female workers in garment and other factories, and three canals in the district will be re-excavated.

Tarique was also scheduled to address the last election rally of yesterday in the capital's Uttara.

[Our Mymensingh correspondent contributed to this report.]