

Rice trader hacked to death in Mymensingh

Several lakh taka looted from his shop, family claims

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

A rice trader was hacked to death by criminals at his own shop in Mymensingh's Trishal upazila on Monday night.

The victim was identified as Susen Chandra Sarker, 62, of Southkanda village in Trishal, said police.

Police said the incident occurred at Susen's shop, "Messrs Bhai Bhai Enterprise," located at Bogar Bazar Chowrasta in Trishal.

Quoting the victim's family members and locals, Md Abdullah Al Mamun, additional superintendent of police (Administration and Finance) in Mymensingh, said the criminals struck Susen with sharp weapons on the head and face, and fled the scene around 11:00pm.

Later, family members found him lying in a pool of blood and rushed him to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital, where doctors declared him dead.

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Workers set up CCTV cameras at Iqbal Nagar Secondary School voting centre in Khulna city yesterday ahead of the national polls. The Election Commission took the initiative to install cameras at the polling stations to monitor voting. PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

4 killed as two buses collide head-on

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

At least four people were killed and more than 30 injured in a head-on collision between two buses on the Dhaka-Pabna highway in Sholabaria area of Pabna's Santhia upazila this morning.

Two people, including a driver and a helper, died on the spot, while two others succumbed to their injuries at hospital, said Md Mostafizur Rahman, officer-in-charge of the Madhpur Highway Police Station.

The victims are Md Kamal Hossain, 40, driver of Shahzadpur Travels; Mehedi Hasan, 28, helper of Maasranga Paribahan; Alef Uddin, 35; and Alomgir Hossain, 36.

The incident took place around 7:30am near the Sholabaria bridge, when a Dhaka-bound Shahzadpur Travels bus collided with a Pabna-bound Maasranga Paribahan bus.

The OC said both drivers lost control of the vehicle, leading to the crash.

Dr Rafikul Islam, assistant director of Pabna General Hospital, said 32 injured passengers were brought to the facility.

Six were later shifted to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital in critical condition, he added.

Police and firefighters rushed to the scene immediately after the accident to rescue victims and clear the wreckage. Normal traffic flow resumed after being suspended during one-hour operation.

BNP unveils plan to monitor polling centres

Party to arrange transport for voters to boost turnout

SAJJAD HOSSAIN

The BNP has issued detailed instructions to its grassroots leaders and activists to boost turnout and prevent irregularities and voter intimidation at polling centres across the country on election day.

Following a meeting attended by senior leaders in the capital yesterday, the party directed its grassroots leadership to deploy between 100 and 500 party members outside each polling centre, depending on voter numbers.

According to party insiders, the BNP will appoint a team leader, centre leader, and venue leader for each polling station to supervise overall operations and ensure compliance with the instructions.

On polling day, leaders and activists

from Chhatra Dal, Jubo Dal, Krishak Dal, Swachchhasebak Dal, and other affiliated bodies will work in three shifts at their assigned centres. Party workers have been instructed to maintain a peaceful presence so that voters do not feel intimidated.

Polling agents have been instructed to check voter lists, inspect ballot boxes, ensure they are properly sealed, record their lock numbers, and file complaints over any irregularities.

They have also been told to send hourly vote counts to a central monitoring cell and not to sign result documents if the BNP's internal count does not match the centre's result.

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Tarique, Shafiqur review poll prep

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two days before the February 12 polls, BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman and Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman separately reviewed their parties' election preparations around the country yesterday, party sources said.

Both leaders issued directives to grassroots organisers after speaking over the phone with district-level leaders and candidates to assess the situation in their respective constituencies.

In the morning, Shafiqur met a 15-member delegation led by Ivars Ijabs, chief observer of the European Union Election Observation Mission and a

member of the European Parliament, at the party's central office in Moghbazar.

Meanwhile, BNP chief Tarique Rahman held discussions with foreign journalists at his office in Gulshan.

Later in the evening, Shafiqur convened a meeting with senior leaders of the 11-party alliance, according to party insiders.

Shafiqur, Jamaat's candidate in Dhaka-15, is scheduled to cast his vote at the Monipur High School and College polling centre in Mirpur's 60 Feet area on February 12.

Tarique, contesting Dhaka-17, will vote at Gulshan Model High School and College in Gulshan-2 and may visit several other polling centres afterward.

People head home

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"my vote," said Kamrul Hasan, a student returning home to Barishal on a launch from Sadarghat.

The rush intensified as thousands of garment workers from Gazipur's industrial zones started leaving yesterday after factories shut in line with a government directive to facilitate voting in the 13th parliament election and July charter referendum.

Akram Hossain, a garment worker, said, "We are going to our village home in Rajbari to stay with my parents and to vote." He was waiting for his bus at Gabtoli terminal yesterday morning.

Industrial units in Gazipur, Tongi, Chowrasta, Konabari, and Sreepur were closed, leading to long queues of people at bus stands along the Dhaka-Mymensingh, Dhaka-Kishoreganj, and Dhaka-Tangail highways. Male and female passengers were seen standing in lines for hours amid severe congestion, reports our Gazipur correspondent.

Around noon, Kamruzzaman, officer-in-charge of Maona Highway Police Station, said intermittent traffic congestion was reported on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway.

"The situation worsened as the flow of vehicles increased from the morning." The departure of workers created scenes reminiscent of an Eid holiday rush, with a steady stream of passengers leaving industrial belts. Law enforcement personnel were deployed at multiple points to ease congestion and maintain traffic flow.

Rahima Begum, a garment worker from Sreepur, said that voting with her family was more valuable than the hardship of traveling home. "We face work pressure all year. Even though the journey is difficult, it is important for us to go home and vote."

However, another worker, Abdul Karim, complained of overcrowding and higher fares. "The bus stand is packed and fares have gone up, but voting is our responsibility."

Saugatul Alam, officer-in-charge of Konabari Naojor Highway Police Station, said managing traffic has become more challenging due to the deployment of personnel for election duty.

"During long holidays, hundreds of police are usually deployed on highways. This time the number is lower as many officers are assigned to election duty," he said, adding that efforts were under way to keep traffic moving in Chandra and surrounding areas despite limited manpower.

The government has declared February 11 a general holiday, while election day on February 12 is already a public holiday.

Additionally, the Ministry of Labour and Employment declared February 10 a general holiday for workers in various industrial zones, allowing industrial employees to enjoy three consecutive holidays from February 10 to 12.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Shop Business Owners' Association announced on February 7 that shops, commercial establishments, and shopping malls nationwide would remain closed for two days, including election day, to ensure wider public participation in the polls and the referendum.

US tariff cut comes at a steep cost

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Zones (EPZs) -- vital to its garment industry -- under the jurisdiction of the general labour law, ending their special regulatory status.

Bangladesh is required to use "digital logistics platforms" for its ports, terminals, and shipping fleet that are not only cyber-secure but specifically built to block "other foreign governments" from accessing the data.

It has to establish measures to restrict the unauthorised export, re-export, and in-country transfer of US-origin or US-controlled items subject to the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) unless they have explicit permission from the US Bureau of Industry and Security.

Dhaka is also required to "screen and share" customs transaction data related to US-origin items with Washington to help identify "transactions of concern," effectively granting the US oversight of Bangladesh's trade flows.

"We have a lot of issues in the agreement to be worried about. Signing such a deal at the eleventh hour of this government is

controversial. They could say, 'let's wait for the elected government,'" said Selim Raihan, executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling.

He argued that the agreement is heavily skewed, imposing a far longer list of obligations on Bangladesh than on the US, which raises serious questions about whether the minimal tariff relief is truly worth the price.

Selim questioned the broader impact of the deal, specifically citing the plan to purchase 14 Boeing jets. "What about the economic security of Bangladesh and its long-term implications?"

"Our national debt has already increased significantly. If we now have to take on additional debt to purchase Boeing aircraft and cannot reap corresponding commercial benefits, that will put further pressure on us. These calculations need careful consideration."

He highlighted the agreement's failure to safeguard the nation's long-term economic security or preserve its policy independence. Questioning the deal's compatibility with global

trade rules, the Dhaka University professor argued that Bangladesh instead should have pursued a conventional free trade agreement with the US.

Although tariffs on Bangladesh's exports have been reduced somewhat, the cost is too high, he said.

"I am concerned about the kind of pressure we will have to face as a result of the commitments we have made in this agreement."

He warned that the deal sets a risky geopolitical precedent, questioning how the country would cope if other nations were to apply similar pressure to extract comparable benefits -- a scenario he described as a major challenge for Bangladesh.

NON-TARIFF BARRIERS
The deal mentions the reduction of various non-tariff barriers in Bangladesh.

"This is an important issue, because if we want to increase our share in global trade, there is no alternative to this. However, it must be ensured that these non-tariff measures do not apply only to one country, but are applicable to all

countries," said Selim.

In the past, US medical devices and pharmaceutical products faced lengthy delays and costs because they had to undergo local testing and obtain fresh marketing authorisation from Bangladeshi authorities, even if they were already approved in the US.

Now, Bangladesh must automatically accept US FDA certifications. It can no longer require further inspection or separate marketing authorisation for US medical products, allowing them direct access to the market.

While not explicitly detailed in the agreement, the purchase commitment for \$3.5 billion in agricultural products (including cotton) typically links to the removal of the long-standing "double fumigation" requirement, where US cotton was subjected to pest treatment upon arrival.

By agreeing to these purchase quotas, Bangladesh is effectively streamlining the entry of US agricultural commodities, removing the procedural delays that previously hampered these imports.

Police roll out three-tier security plan

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Amid the situation, police said a three-tier security plan has been put in place, with static forces at every polling centre, mobile patrol teams in surrounding areas, and striking units on standby to respond to any emergency.

Additionally, the home ministry has directed the suspension of departure procedures at all land ports from 6:00am tomorrow to 6:00am on Friday to ensure an obstruction-free poll.

On January 18, the interim government set January 31 as the deadline for depositing legal weapons at the respective police stations, and warned that any licence-holder who failed to submit firearms within the stipulated timeframe would face legal action under relevant provisions.

Under the directive, every licensed firearms holder, except financial institutions, candidates, and those engaged in election duty, was required to deposit weapons at police stations. However, only 27,995 licence-holders handed in firearms during the timeframe, according to the Police Headquarters database.

The PHQ data show there are around 53,702 legal firearms licence-holders in the country. Of them, around 5,565 firearms are owned by different financial institutions and banks, while the remaining 48,137 licences were issued at the personal

level. Contacted by The Daily Star yesterday, Khondoker Rafiqul Islam, additional inspector general (crime and operation) of PHQ, said that some 20,000 firearms have not been deposited so far.

"Because they have not yet been handed in does not mean they are illegal.... Some people, including political leaders and election candidates, have valid licences but fall outside the submission requirements at this time," he said, adding that some candidates are among those exempted.

He, however, could not provide separate data on exempted categories. Data show that around 2,034 candidates are contesting the election this year.

Meanwhile, police said a total of 5,760 firearms were looted from the police and their establishments, and 1,330 of them have not been recovered yet. Efforts to recover the remaining weapons are ongoing.

"Any weapon that is illegal and remains outside lawful control poses a serious threat," Baharul Alam, Inspector General of Police, said yesterday, adding that illegal weapons also enter the country through various routes.

To counter the threat, he said a near fool-proof security plan has been put in place for the election, with police

and Ansar forces supported by around 100,000 army personnel conducting intensive mobile patrols.

He said the election would be held securely, regardless of the number of weapons at large.

The joint forces are also conducting a special drive to recover weapons. During a briefing on February 5, the army said that they have so far recovered 10,152 firearms and 291,000 rounds of ammunition, and detained 22,282 criminals, handing them over to the police.

Tawohidul Haque, an associate professor at Dhaka University's Institute of Social Welfare and Research, said law enforcers would play a decisive role in ensuring a free and fair election, but the ground situation since the schedule was announced "has not reflected that."

He warned that looted and illegal firearms were creating a sense of fear in society and could affect the polls if not brought under control.

According to a report by the special branch of police, at least 34 incidents of gun violence have taken place since the election schedule declaration, leaving at least 10 people killed.

SECURITY AT POLLING CENTRES
IGP Baharul Alam said that around 24,000 polling centres are marked as high or medium risk, and police would try to cover these locations with body-worn cameras.

Addressing the media at the Central Command and Control Centre yesterday, he said a total of 157,805 police personnel will be involved in election security.

"Of these, 93,391 will be stationed at polling centres, with the remainder serving in mobile and striking units. An additional 29,798 personnel from police stations and other units will provide election-related support, bringing the total deployment to 187,603."

CCTV cameras have been installed at 80-90 percent of polling centres under an Election Commission initiative, while superintendents of police will operate drones where available, depending on "capacity and necessity," said the police chief.

The election duty will include one lakh armed forces, around 37,453 Border Guard Bangladesh officers, and 5.76 lakh Ansar officials.

Police statistics show that 317 incidents of pre-election violence occurred between December 11 and February 9, leaving 603 injured and five dead, said the IGP.

On militancy, Baharul said there is no "severe" fear of attacks at present but noted precautions remain. He added that threats previously aimed at disrupting campaigns or detonating bombs have largely subsided, and police are now "more or less" assured that polling will proceed safely.

Nation at fever pitch

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contesting 299 out of 300 seats, including 63 women. There are also 273 independents, including 20 women. Election to Sherpur-3 constituency has been suspended following the death of a candidate.

Ballot papers are scheduled to reach polling centres today under tight security. Officials said logistical arrangements are in place, with thousands of polling officials and security personnel mobilised to oversee the vote.

The Election Commission has expressed overall satisfaction with the country's law and order situation.

"We are satisfied with the law and order situation as it stands. It would have been better if the isolated incidents that occurred had not happened. However, we are in a better position now than at any time in the past," Election Commissioner Brig Gen (ret'd) Abul Fazal Md Sanaullah said at a press briefing yesterday.

He, however, cautioned that "evil forces" remain active and expressed hope that law enforcement agencies would exert their maximum effort.

"We commend our law enforcement agencies for what they have done so far. We hope they will provide their maximum effort to maintain law and order during the election and the post-election period," he said, urging political parties, candidates and supporters to ensure the polls remain festive.

Inspector General of Police Baharul Alam said police have rolled out a three-tier security plan, with static forces at every polling centre, mobile patrol teams outside, and striking units on standby to respond to emergencies.

He said 157,805 police personnel will be engaged in election security, with 93,391 deployed as static forces at centres and the rest in mobile and striking units. The police will also deploy 29,798 personnel from police stations and elsewhere for election-related support.

"In total, the police deployment under the security plan will be 1,87,603," he said.

Meanwhile, the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) has described the electoral environment

as "very positive".

"We have been speaking both to candidates and authorities in all districts and regions across the country, and the general atmosphere is very positive and hopeful," Chief Observer Ivars Ijabs said at a press conference in Dhaka yesterday.

"Most of our interlocutors have emphasised that this should be a new page in Bangladesh's history and democracy," he said, ahead of the deployment of 90 short-term observers across the country to monitor polling and vote counting.

The EU has sent its largest ever election observation mission to Bangladesh, with more than 200 observers in total. At least 60 long-term observers have been working in the field since early January.

Thursday's polls will largely see contests among candidates backed by two major coalitions led by the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami.

BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman and Jamaat Ameer Shafiqur Rahman yesterday inquired about constituency-wise preparations, issuing directives to party leaders at different levels. They spoke by phone with district-level leaders and candidates to assess readiness across constituencies.

FEAR OF VIOLENCE
In Chattogram, many minority voters fear post-election violence, recalling similar experiences in the past.

"On one side BNP, on the other side Jamaat. If the BNP loses, they blame the minorities; Jamaat does the same. State, election, and persecution have become synonymous for us," said a Hindu youth living in the Jamalkhan area, requesting anonymity.

Manoranjan Shil, 56, a farmer from Aladadpur village in Rangpur's Gangachara upazila, said his village came under attack in July last year, when several houses were vandalised and livestock, furniture and gold ornaments looted.

"We are still haunted by the terrifying experience of the attack. We are still in fear," he told The Daily Star.

However, minority voters in Faridpur and Rajbari reported no such fears ahead of the polls, while mixed reactions were found in Mymensingh and Tangail.