

"It feels like our voice matters again... We have waited too long for this day. I am really excited,"
Raihan Bin Sarwar
A first-time voter from Mirpur-15



Nation votes, hope rekindled

JS polls, referendum today set to end long denial of people's right to vote

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR and AHMED DEEPTO

Bangladesh has been without a competitive election for so long that almost a third of the electorate has never witnessed genuine polls in which voters elect parliamentarians of their choosing. That is set to change today as thousands queue at polling centres, some since the crack of dawn, to reclaim their franchise. These same voters had taken

nation will wait in suspense over who will emerge victorious.

Alongside the parliamentary election, citizens will also cast ballots in a referendum on constitutional reforms born out of a rare political consensus. The July charter is set to strengthen democratic institutions and ensure they function with greater accountability and effectiveness.

The memories of past elections still weigh heavy. The one-sided contests of

12.77 CR REGISTERED VOTERS
The electorate include 6,48,25,361 male and 6,28,85,200 female voters. There are 1,232 hijra voters

50 POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE RACE

Total seats **300**
Election in **299** seats
Total candidates **2,028**
Candidates from political parties **1,755**
Independent candidates **273**
Female candidates **83**



8 LAKH ELECTION OFFICIALS

Returning officers **69**
Assistant returning officers **598**
Presiding officers **42,779**
Assistant presiding officers **2,47,482**
Polling officers **4,94,964**



CANDIDATES FROM MAJOR PARTIES

BNP **292**
Jamaat **225**
NCP **32**
Jatiya Party (Ershad) **196**
Islami Andolan Bangladesh **259**



OBSERVERS

40 countries and 8 int'l organisations
Foreign observers: **335**
Another 57 on invitation
Local observers **44,995**

42,779 POLLING CENTRES

21,506 are identified as **RISKY** centres

POSTAL BALLOTS
7,72,134 expatriates
7,61,138 local govt, election officials and others

MAGISTRACY

Judicial inquiry committee **299**
Judicial magistrates **657**
Executive magistrates **2,098**



to the streets in July 2024 to overthrow a tyrannical regime. They bled while many others lost their lives.

It had been a monsoon of rupture. But today, they can usher a spring of hope.

Keen to ensure a peaceful election, the Election Commission has taken all-out measures to drape the country in a security blanket. And the voters will be at hand to make it festive. Many have journeyed back to their ancestral homes to take back what had been long withheld – their right to vote.

Bangladesh is witnessing a competitive election again after 17 years as the entire

2014 and 2024 were widely dismissed as shams, while the 2018 edition was marred by allegations of ballot stuffing and intimidation. Together, these episodes destroyed public trust and left an entire generation without the experience of a genuine electoral contest.

"It feels like our voice matters again... We have waited too long for this day. I am really excited," said Raihan Bin Sarwar, a private company executive from Mirpur-15, who will vote for the first time today.

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VOTING TIME
7:30am to 4:30pm

ROAD TO 13TH JS POLLS

- » **August 5, 2024:** Student-led mass uprising ousts AL-led government
- » **August 8, 2024:** Interim government formed and sworn in
- » **September 11, 2024:** Six reform commissions constituted
- » **February 2025:** Major reform commissions submit proposals to the government
- » **June 13, 2025:** CA Prof Muhammad Yunus and Tarique Rahman meet in London; joint statement issued stating pre-Ramadan polls timing
- » **February 12, 2025:** National Consensus Commission formed
- » **October 14, 2025:** July Charter finalised and sent to all political parties
- » **October 17, 2025:** July Charter signed by political parties
- » **November 25, 2025:** Advisory Council approves draft Referendum Ordinance
- » **December 11, 2025:** CEC declares election schedule
- » **December 29, 2025:** Final date for submission of nomination papers
- » **December 30, 2025 to January 4, 2026:** Nomination papers scrutinised
- » **January 11, 2026:** Appeals filed with the EC against the RO's orders
- » **January 12 to 18, 2026:** Appeals heard and disposed of
- » **January 20, 2026:** Final date for withdrawal of candidacy
- » **January 21, 2026:** Election symbols allocated and final list of candidates published
- » **January 22, 2026:** Election campaigning begins
- » **February 10, 2026:** Election campaigning ends
- » **February 12, 2026:** Election Day/National Referendum



CEC assures people of free, fair polls

Urges all to accept public mandate

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin has assured people that today's elections will be free and fair, urging all parties and candidates to accept the results as part of the democratic process.

In a televised address to the nation yesterday, he said differences of opinion are natural in a democracy and called on voters to turn out in large numbers and cast their ballots peacefully.

"You will come to SEE PAGE 5 COL 1

Security measures 'unprecedented'

MUNTAKIM SAAD and MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

Law enforcement agencies have put in place a tight security arrangement across the country for the national election and referendum today, deploying nearly 10 lakh personnel to ensure a free, fair, and uninterrupted vote.

According to officials, the forces, which were deployed on February 8, will remain on full alert until Saturday, as part of a comprehensive plan to maintain law and order, described by many officials as "unprecedented".

The measures include polling centre-based deployment, enhanced patrols, and technology-backed surveillance to monitor sensitive areas and vulnerable polling centres.

Additional forces will be kept ready to respond swiftly to any untoward incident so that the voters can cast their ballots without fear, the officials said.

In the capital, traffic remained light since yesterday morning as many residents left for their village homes to cast their votes. Those who stayed back often faced checks at different points. A handful of buses were running, most of them nearly empty. Army vehicles were seen on patrol, while police vehicles were stationed at several intersections.

On Manik Miah Avenue, members of the army and police stopped vehicles, questioned passengers, and checked identification documents. Similar checkpoints and patrol teams were seen in Kawran Bazar, Mirpur, Uttara, Rampura, Banani, and Badda.

"Checkpoints have been set up and patrol teams deployed at key points to ensure security," said Harun Or Rashid, deputy commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Motijheel Division.

He said police assigned for polling centre-based duties were being deployed, while personnel from the army and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) were also on the ground to help ensure a free and fair election.

On election day, judicial magistrates, if they take cognisance of any electoral offence during duty, will dispose of cases through summary trials and send the relevant report, in a prescribed format, to the deputy secretary (Law-1 Wing) of the EC Secretariat.

To monitor the overall situation, the Election Commission has formed a central coordination cell.

The commission also said it is using a special security app to track the situation on the ground in real time. The home ministry has established a separate coordination cell to receive law-and-order-related complaints.

For the first time, police are using bodycams at polling centres, which will also have CCTV coverage.

Live camera feeds will be monitored

directly from the offices of district superintendents of police as well as from Police Headquarters. If violence breaks out anywhere, senior officials will view the live feed from the centre and issue necessary instructions.

Police Headquarters sources said a technology-driven "Operations Command and Control Room" has been set up at each district SP office. From there, risk-based identification of polling centres and live location tracking of mobile and strike teams will be carried out.

They also said mobile teams and strike parties, formed by combining members of all law enforcement agencies and the armed forces, will remain on round-the-clock patrol, with senior officials monitoring them in real time.

To ensure uninterrupted communication with all officers and forces engaged in election duty, walkie-talkie sub-stations have been installed, the sources said. Alongside live location monitoring of mobile and striking teams, directives can be issued to dispatch them swiftly to specific locations as required.

In addition, arrangements have been made to monitor social media and electronic media, and use Google Maps



Cast votes responsibly

Yunus urges all

BSS, Dhaka

Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus yesterday urged voters to cast their ballots conscientiously in today's 13th parliamentary election and referendum, describing the vote as a defining moment for the nation's future.

In a message on the eve of the polls, he said the election and referendum are a unique and significant chapter in Bangladesh's political history.

Extending greetings to the nation, Yunus called on political parties, candidates and all concerned to

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'Rule of law will be our top priority if voted to power'

Tarique tells Arab News

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

If voted to power, the BNP wants to establish justice in the country, party Chairman Tarique Rahman said.

He said no one is above the law and that anyone who has committed crimes must face trial, adding that the matter is not about any specific political party but about ensuring justice and the rule of law.

Speaking to Saudi Arabia-based English newspaper Arab News, the party chief said he wants his administration to pursue accountability for the former leadership and meet the political and economic expectations of the youth movement that brought about the change.

He is expecting victory in the election following a change in regime that for years restricted his supporters' voting rights.

"BNP is the most popular party in the country. We have been struggling for the people's voting rights for more than 17 years. We represent the people's expectations and aspirations," he told Arab News in Dhaka on Tuesday.

"I believe the people will vote for us and, inshallah, we will achieve a landslide victory," he added.

In the first six months, his party's immediate priorities would include restoring law and order, democratic reform and creating a business-

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'Don't pay heed to propaganda'

Shafiqur urges voters on Facebook

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman on his verified Facebook page yesterday urged voters not to be misled by "disinformation" or to pay heed to "propaganda" and to cast their ballots for their preferred candidates and symbols today.

Several posts were shared on the Jamaat ameer's Facebook throughout the day – some were aimed at youths, some at women, while others were for people from all walks of life.

The page also shared video clips of his speeches at election rallies held across districts during nearly 20 days of campaigning, as well as photocards containing excerpts from his speeches. The posts outlined his party's stance on various incidents.

Around 11:00am yesterday, Thakurgaon district Jamaat Ameer Belal

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DEPLOYMENT BREAKDOWN	
FORCE / AGENCY	NUMBER DEPLOYED
Army	1,03,000
Air Force	3,730
Navy	5,000
BGB (outside Dhaka)	36,013
BGB (in Dhaka)	1,440
Coast Guard	3,585
Police (outside Dhaka)	161,088
Police (in Dhaka)	26,515
Rab	9,349
Ansar	5,76,483
Village Police	45,820

FOLLOW US ON

FOR LIVE COVERAGE AND UPDATES OF THE ELECTION!

NOTICE
Today's **BUSINESS** is published inside the main newspaper, not as a separate pullout.



LAST-MINUTE LOGISTICS

On the eve of the 13th national election, ballot papers and other materials were transported under tight security to polling centres across the country. *Clockwise from top left:* Security personnel wait outside Dhaka Polytechnic Institute in Tejgaon to receive election supplies for distribution; materials are carried out of Azimpur Govt Girls' School and College for delivery; volunteers at election campaign booths in the capital assist voters in locating their designated centres; election materials are ferried across the Padma River and escorted to polling centres in Rajshahi's Paba upazila; and supplies are being prepared for dispatch from the Sadar Upazila Parishad office to polling centres in the Barishal-5 constituency. The photos were taken yesterday.

PHOTOS: AMRAN HOSSAIN, MEHEDI HASAN, PRABIR DAS, TITU DAS, AZAHAR UDDIN



Attacks, widespread use of money concerning

Says IAB at presser

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Islami Andolon Bangladesh (IAB) has expressed concern over the overall electoral environment, citing incidents of attacks and the widespread use of money.

Political parties like the BNP and Jamaat did not get rid of the previous electoral culture, said Gazi Ataur Rahman, senior joint secretary of IAB, at a media briefing yesterday at its office.

The party said its leaders and activists have been facing threats, intimidation and attacks in different constituencies including Barguna 1 and 2, Patuakhali-1, Bhola 1 and 4, Pirojpur-3, Laxmipur 4, Jhalakathi-1 and constituencies in Barishal.

"At least 10 of our activists are still hospitalised due to different attacks across the constituencies."

BNP men have broken an activist's leg in Barguna-1 while Jamaat men have attacked us in Barguna-2, he said.

"Both parties' activists are involved in the wrongdoings. In some places, they are spreading lies that the IAB has provided their support to the candidates of other parties."

IAB fielded 258 candidates across the country and none of the candidates have withdrawn from the race.

"It's impossible that anyone expressed their support for any other candidates."

Besides, they have information that the parties have been spending a huge amount of money on voters.

"We urge the law enforcement agencies to play more active roles in this regard."

The IAB wants a free, fair and credible election and any sort of election engineering would not be accepted, he added.

'Cash seizures' infringing on civil liberties

Says NCP spokesperson

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

So-called money recovery drives targeting leaders of various parties are infringing on individual freedoms, said Asif Mahmud Shojib Bhuyain, spokesperson for the National Citizen Party and chairman of its election steering committee.

"We are making our position very clear -- if any candidate or their activists are seen trying to buy votes with money... then it is clearly a crime," he told an emergency press conference at the party's Banglamotor office last night.

Asif added that such crimes must be punished regardless of party affiliation. However, he alleged that ordinary possession of cash was being framed as criminal activity, with money forcibly taken from individuals.

"... in such cases, the administration must play a more neutral role."

The NCP spokesperson praised joint forces and the army for recovering illegal weapons from different areas and urged authorities to act quickly on remaining illegal stockpiles of weapons.

Asif alleged that BNP and its alliance partners are trying to disrupt voting in constituencies where they are weak. "We learned that in seats where BNP and their alliance candidates fear defeat, they are trying to sabotage the election."

He said more than 50,000 observers have been deployed but lack proper logistical support. "We fear they will not be able to perform properly, and neutral reporting may be hampered."

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Nation votes, hope rekindled

FROM PAGE 1

Prof Sk Tawfique M Haque, an expert on policy and governance at the North South University, said people now feel empowered, as they will be able to elect their representatives.

Regarding enthusiasm among voters, he said that images of people rushing home in large numbers to cast ballots have been absent for many years. "The turnout could reach record levels."

Even poor and low-income citizens are spending from their own pockets to travel home just to cast vote -- some riding on the roofs of trains, he said.

"Since the mass uprising, people have become far more politically confident. There is no fear, no hesitation. This level of enthusiasm is unprecedented, and for democracy, it is a major achievement," he said.

Ever since the interim government took office, it often repeated its priorities -- reforms, justice, and election. Although elections are generally held every five years, this election, the 13th edition in Bangladesh, comes just 26 months after the last one -- triggered by a mass uprising that ousted the previous regime in August 2024.

Awami League has been barred from the election for its role in the brutal crackdown that claimed at least 1,400 lives. While 50 parties are contesting the election, the main contest will be between two alliances -- one led by the BNP and the other by the Jamaat-e-Islami.

While the BNP was pressing for an election by December 2025 from early in the interim government's tenure, other parties, including the Jamaat, said they would go to polls only after reforms were carried out.

But as demands for a quick election became stronger, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus announced in June 2025 that polls would be held in the first half of February, provided that preparations were complete.

Reforms remained elusive until mid-October, when 25 parties signed the July charter after months of negotiations among 30 parties at the National Consensus Commission. Five parties refused to sign, which included the National Citizen Party (NCP), the natural heir to the July uprising.

In November, the government announced that the national election and the referendum would be held on the same day. Later, the Election Commission confirmed February 12 as polling day.

In his address to the nation, Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin yesterday urged citizens to vote, reminding them that it was not only a civic right but also a responsibility.

"I appeal to political parties, candidates and voters; behave responsibly to maintain peace and harmony," he said.

Polling is taking place in 299 constituencies, with election to Sherpur-3 suspended following the death of a candidate. Today, 42,779 polling stations will open their doors to 12.77 crore voters between 7:30am and 4:30pm.

They will be picking from 2,028 candidates -- 1,755 fielded by 50 parties and 273 independents. Among them, only 83 are women.

The BNP fielded 292 candidates, compared to 225 from the Jamaat. Both parties gave up the remaining seats to their alliance partners. The NCP, formed by frontline July protestors, is contesting 32 seats as part of the Jamaat-led alliance.

The Jatiya Party (Ershad) fielded 196 candidates, while Islami Andolon Bangladesh nominated 259 contestants.

With the AL banned and its registration withheld, the political landscape has shifted dramatically, leaving the scope for the BNP and the Jamaat-led alliance to secure AL strongholds where they never had a chance.

Founded in 1978, BNP has been out of power for 17 years -- its longest stretch. The Jamaat, banned after independence for collaborating with Pakistan during the war, was revived in 1976 and later joined BNP in a four-party alliance in 1999. Together, they won in 2001, with two Jamaat leaders becoming cabinet members.

In 2013, the High Court cancelled Jamaat's registration, ruling that provisions of its charter violated the constitution and election laws.

Facing criticism for its ties with the Jamaat, the BNP distanced itself from the Islamist party. The 20-party

alliance dissolved in December 2022 after BNP asked allies not to use the alliance's name.

BNP won the 1979 election, and then the election in 1991 following the fall of HM Ershad in a mass uprising. It also won the one-sided polls in February 1996 but that administration was short lived. It regained power in 2001.

Jamaat took part in the national election under its name in 1986. The party achieved its best result in 1991 with 18 seats and 12.13 percent of the popular vote.

While both parties pledge justice as a founding principle, their chiefs have exchanged taunts and barbs, and at times fiery rhetoric.

BNP's Tarique Rahman and Jamaat's Shafiqur Rahman had been in a war of words. The BNP slammed the Jamaat for its role during the 1971 Liberation War, and accused of misleading people through misuse of religion, and of conspiring to carry out "election engineering."

On the other hand, the Jamaat accused the BNP of corruption, land grabbing, extortion, and "neofascism."

While pre-polls violence is not unusual in South Asia, it has been low in Bangladesh this time.

"In a densely populated country like Bangladesh, where emotions run high during elections, the overall atmosphere remains relatively calm," said Prof Tawfique.

Political analysts note another striking feature of this election: the heightened global interest in Bangladesh's democratic transition. The polls are being held under the watch of the largest contingent of local and international observers since 2008 -- 335 international observers from 40 countries and eight representatives from international organisations. Another 57 observers have arrived at the EC's invitation.

Badiul Alam Majumdar, chief of the now-defunct Electoral Reform Commission, said the surge in observers reflects the competitive nature of this election.

"Many international observers showed little interest in monitoring the last three polls, as they were not contested," he added.

'Guard polling centres until results are in'

FROM PAGE 16

this because they do not like the restoration of democracy. Others are doing it because they think they have little chance of winning."

The BNP leader said that they did not expect a political party to take an immoral and illegal path.

"But sadly, from the information and news we have received throughout the day, we are very hurt. We do not think that what is happening can disturb or damage the election."

Nazrul also said that what they were about to achieve after many years of struggle must not be obstructed or derailed.

"We want the democratic rights of the people to be restored. With the support of the people, we want to take responsibility for running the state. After getting that responsibility, we want to work for the welfare of the people. We want to implement the July Charter," he added.

Seven hours earlier, at a separate briefing, BNP Chairman's Adviser Mahdi Amin yesterday urged political parties to prevent fraud and protect a festive and spontaneous vote.

"From BNP, we call upon all democratic political parties: let us ensure a peaceful election environment, not violence. Let us maintain mutual coexistence and cordiality," Mahdi said at a press conference at the party's Gulshan office.

Referring to the incident at Saidpur airport where Belal Uddin, the ameer of Jamaat's Thakurgaon district unit, was held with Tk 74 lakh in cash earlier in the day, he said there is "no scope" to view it as an isolated episode.

Questions have arisen over how a top district-level Jamaat leader was travelling from Dhaka to Thakurgaon on the eve of the election with a "huge amount of money" when banks, financial institutions and business activities were shut to prevent illegal money transactions during the polls.

"Where is this money coming from, what is the purpose and who was it meant for?"

Mahdi, also the spokesman for BNP's Election Management Committee, termed it a breach of the electoral code of conduct.

It showed the "bankruptcy" of a party "detached from the people" and an attempt to spread "unethical influence".

He also questioned what he called a contradiction between Jamaat's rhetoric on establishing justice and fighting corruption and the alleged use of money to buy votes.

Mahdi further alleged that similar incidents of illegal financial transactions had been seen in Dhaka-15, the constituency of Jamaat's ameer, as well as in other areas including Cumilla, Noakhali and Khulna.

Citing media reports, he said that in many places "terrorists" of a political party were stockpiling bamboo sticks, pipes, stamps and locally-made weapons to spread fear among voters.

He alleged that incidents of violence, sudden attacks, arson, voter intimidation and money distribution had taken place in different districts, and that several people linked to such activities had been arrested by law enforcement agencies.

As an example, he mentioned an attack in Bogura-4, saying Jamaat "identified terrorists" attacked Thalta-Majhgram Union BNP President Masud Rana in Nandigram, leaving his eye "seriously damaged". He condemned the attack and demanded swift justice.

He urged the Election Commission, returning officers and law enforcement agencies to treat each incident with the "highest importance" and take necessary action quickly.

The BNP had learned that large numbers of burqas and niqabs were

being made in different places. If anyone tried to misuse the Islamic attire to cast fraudulent votes under false identities, it must be resisted, he said.

Referring to an earlier incident in Lakshmipur, Mahdi said a printing press owner was arrested after illegal voting seals were recovered and later gave a confessional statement in court, claiming the seals were made on the instruction of a leader of "that party".

"This is evidence of a plot to influence the election."

Today's election would help establish a government that is accountable to the people, committed to transparency and accountability.

Sudan RSF drone strike on school kills two children

AFP, Khartoum

A drone strike blamed on Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces killed two children and injured 12 others yesterday in the southern Kordofan city of El-Rahad, a medical source told AFP.

The Kordofan region is currently the fiercest battlefield in the war raging between the RSF and the regular army since April 2023.

"I saw a dozen students injured," Ahmed Moussa, an eyewitness to the attack, told AFP, adding that the drone had struck a traditional Koranic school.

El-Rahad lies on a key axis linking El Obeidi, the North Kordofan state capital, to the White Nile river -- the army's main line to the capital Khartoum.

The city was retaken by the army last February, as part of a rapid offensive that saw it push west to break a long-running siege on El-Obeidi.

The RSF has been trying to re-circle El Obeidi since, including by launching successive drone strikes on the eastern highway, which connects the vast western region of Darfur with the rest of the country.

Since it began, the war has killed tens of thousands and left around 11 million people displaced, creating the world's largest hunger and displacement crises.

It has also effectively split the country in two, with the army holding the north, centre and east while the RSF and its allies control the west and parts of the south.

The army -- on the back foot since the RSF consolidated its hold on Darfur in October -- has appeared to tilt the balance in recent days, breaking two paramilitary sieges on South Kordofan cities: Dilling and Kadugli.

The cities had come to exemplify the violence in Kordofan, where hundreds of thousands face starvation under daily drone strikes.

China's Xi hails 'fight against corruption' after top general's fall

AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping hailed the military's "fight against corruption", state media reported yesterday, in a rare acknowledgement of graft weeks after Beijing escalated a sweeping purge by probing its top general.

Beijing's defence ministry said last month it was investigating Zhang Youxia, a vice chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission (CMC), as well as Liu Zhenli, chief of staff of the CMC's joint staff department, which oversees combat planning.

The pair were the latest to fall under a huge drive to root out graft at all levels of the Chinese Communist Party and state since Xi came to power more than a decade ago. The drive has targeted the military in recent years.

Speaking to soldiers in a virtual

address on Tuesday, Xi said the military had "undergone revolutionary tempering in the fight against corruption", using a phrase commonly associated with strengthening military and party loyalty.

"The People's Liberation Army has advanced in depth political rectification (and) effectively responded to various risks and challenges," Xi said, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

The anti-graft drive in the military has decimated the powerful CMC from its seven-person roster in 2022 to one general alongside Xi, who serves as its chair.

Leaders across the military's service branches have also been investigated or expelled.

Xi said in his remarks that "the past year has been highly unusual and extraordinary" but troops "have proven fully reliable and trustworthy".

WB okays \$370m to restore Dhaka rivers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The World Bank has approved \$370 million in financing to improve sanitation and solid waste management services aimed at reducing water pollution and restoring rivers and canals in and around Dhaka.

The Metro Dhaka Water Security and Resilience Program will strengthen the capacity of local and national institutions to curb pollution in greater Dhaka, which generates one-third of the country's GDP and half of its formal employment, according to a press release.

The programme introduces a results-based financing system to help city corporations and the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) deliver measurable improvements.

It is expected to provide safely managed sanitation

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An empty Naya Paltan area in the capital yesterday. As many left Dhaka to cast their votes in their respective constituencies, the streets were left deserted and devoid of life. With just a day to go before the national election, most areas in the city were empty, almost resembling the scene most commonly seen during Eid.

Inset, an empty Hanif Flyover in Jatraabari.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN, ORCHID CHAKMA



Local factors may trump symbols in many seats

STAR REPORT

As the country heads into the 13th National Parliamentary Election today, one factor other than party symbols is likely to influence contests across constituencies: local popularity.

From Chattogram to Sylhet and Mymensingh to Faridpur, voters repeatedly say they want "one of our own", someone rooted in the community, accessible and responsive to local concerns.

In Sylhet's Sunamganj-2 constituency, politics has long revolved around personalities rather than parties. Late Suranjit Sengupta embodied this tradition, with the seat often referred to as "Babu Suranjit's seat".

His image remains so omnipresent that two rival candidates, BNP's Nasir Uddin Chowdhury and Jamaat's Barrister Shishir Manir, have repeatedly referred to Suranjit's name during their campaigns.

From Chattogram to Sylhet and Mymensingh to Faridpur, voters repeatedly say they want "one of our own", someone rooted in the community, accessible and responsive to local concerns.



"Even though Suranjit Sengupta repeatedly won, it was known not as an Awami League seat but as his seat," said Partha Ray of Jagdal union.

Prashanta Sagar Das said, "Politics in this haor region revolves around individuals, not party identities. In the end, the result here will depend on personal image."

Both candidates are tailoring appeals to the Hindu community, which makes up nearly half the electorate, underscoring how local networks and reputations shape strategy.

In Chattogram, discussions with voters show many prefer to make candidate-centric decisions, prioritising local issues. In Chattogram-II, Jamaat's Shafiqul Alam, a former ward councillor, is challenging BNP heavyweight Amir Khasru.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 2

'Ensure state recognition, basic rights'

Hijra community members urge next govt

SADI MUHAMMAD ALOK and SHARIF M SHAFIQUE

Meem Hazera, 45, the lone hijra/ third gender voter from Kumarbarila village under Dhaka's Nawabganj upazila, is eagerly waiting to cast a vote in the national election today, like everyone else.

"No government thinks about us distinctly. We are still deprived of basic rights. Even ahead of the upcoming polls no one stated any plans for us. Yet, we vote regularly because it is our right, and we will exercise it this time as well, as citizens of this country, no matter whether anyone thinks of us or not. I will go to the centre on time and cast my own vote," Meem told The Daily Star recently.

A review of the election manifestos of seven major political parties shows that most of them have not separately mentioned the hijra community.

The Jamaat-e-Islami's manifesto mentions that "real" hijras will be identified and rehabilitated, and special training and job quotas will be reserved for them.

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According to EC data, the total number of hijra voters in the country for this election is 1,220 across 272 of the 300 constituencies, including 114 in Dhaka.



FEBRUARY 12 ELECTION | DHAKA 1-20

Dhaka may become the bellwether again

SHARIF M SHAFIQUE and SADI MUHAMMAD ALOK

A long-standing, unwritten equation has shaped Bangladesh's parliamentary elections — the party that secures a majority in the capital usually finds its path to forming the government.

Since the mass uprising of the 1990s, Dhaka's electoral outcome has mirrored the national mandate. In the 5th National Parliamentary Election in 1991, the BNP swept all 13 constituencies in Dhaka district and went on to form the government.

In June 1996, the Awami League won eight of Dhaka's 13 seats, while BNP secured five — marking AL's return to power after 21 years. In 2001, the BNP-led four-party alliance again swept all 13 Dhaka seats before forming the government.

After constituency delimitation in 2008 increased Dhaka's seats from 13 to 20, the Awami League won 18 of them in the 9th National Election, leading its alliance to power.

Political analysts say Dhaka's impact is largely psychological. Voters in rural areas often respond to the "political wind" blowing from the capital.

As the nation's administrative and commercial hub, Dhaka's electorate is considered politically conscious, and foreign diplomats and observers closely monitor polling in the city. Winning Dhaka,



AT A GLANCE

Dhaka has 20 seats (up from 13 before delimitation in 2008)

Past polls show Dhaka sweeps helped shape govt formation in 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2008.

Analysts say Dhaka creates 'political wind' that influences rural voters

Diplomatic, observer attention makes Dhaka wins a signal of legitimacy

With AL absent, main fight is BNP vs Jamaat-led alliance

Several Dhaka seats set for tight contests

therefore, also signals international legitimacy.

Badiul Alam Majumdar, chief of the Election Reform Commission and secretary of Shujan, told The Daily Star, "People from all districts reside in Dhaka. So the city's political mood reflects the national mindset. A party winning Dhaka

suggests broader public support nationwide."

Now with the 13th parliamentary election approaching, the "Dhaka Factor" is once again in focus.

However, the contest has shifted. In the absence of the Awami League, the main battle is between the BNP and the Jamaat-e-Islami-led II-party alliance.

While the BNP aims to reclaim dominance across Dhaka, Jamaat and its allies, along with the National Citizen Party (NCP), are trying to cut into that vote base.

In many constituencies, the key contests are between the Sheaf of Paddy (BNP) and the Scale (Jamaat), Water Lily Bud (NCP), or Rickshaw (Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis).

CONSTITUENCY DYNAMICS
Political observations and voter conversations suggest that at least six of Dhaka's 20 seats will see intense competition.

Dhaka-1 (Dohar-Nawabganj): A former BNP stronghold, this seat now features a contest between BNP's Khandaker Abu Ashfaq and Jamaat's Mohammad Nazrul Islam. Ashfaq relies on organisational strength, while Nazrul has gained traction locally. Antara Selima Huda, daughter of former BNP MP Barrister Nazmul Huda, is also in the race.

Dhaka-2 (Savar partial & Keraniganj): Historically a BNP seat before AL took over in 2008. Here, BNP heavyweight Amanullah

SEE PAGE 4 COL 2

'Feels like Eid holidays'

Dhaka turns quiet as scores head home to cast votes

HELEMUL ALAM

With only a day left before the national election, Dhaka wore a deserted look yesterday as many city residents left the capital to cast their votes in their respective constituencies.

As both yesterday and today have been declared general holidays for the election, the exodus began on February 10. Bus terminals, launch ghats and train stations saw heavy passenger movement as people travelled to their hometowns to take part in the voting.

Around 48 lakh mobile phone subscribers left Dhaka from February 9 to yesterday evening, ahead of the national election and referendum, according to mobile operators.

The figures indicate a significant outflow of people from the capital as voters travel to their hometowns to cast their ballots.

An authorised toll collector of the Dhaka North City Corporation at Gabtoli said normally around 1,100-1,200 buses depart daily from the bus terminal. Over the past two days, however, the number of departing buses has surged to 2,000-2,200.

Roads that usually remain clogged with cars, CNG-run auto-rickshaws, battery-operated rickshaws, buses and motorcycles appeared almost empty.

Traffic congestion, a regular feature of the capital, was notably absent, and vehicles were seen moving swiftly through major intersections. The usually chaotic streets, including Farmgate, Shahbagh and Motijheel, experienced an unusual calm.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 7

Where will key leaders vote today?

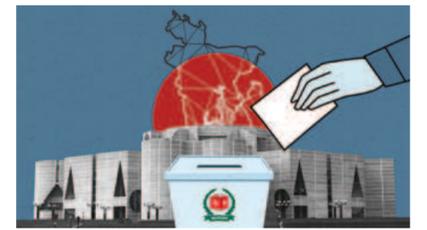
STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus, advisers of the interim government, and key political figures are set to cast their franchise at their respective voting centres in Dhaka and elsewhere during the 13th National Parliamentary Election and the referendum today.

Yunus will cast his vote at 10:00am at Gulshan Model School and College centre in the capital, the CA Press Wing said in a statement.

Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin is scheduled to vote at Eskaton Garden High School centre around 10:00am.

Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan will cast her vote at Adarsha College centre in Dhaka.



Home Adviser Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury is scheduled to cast his vote at Baridhara Scholars International School and College centre in DOHS, Dhaka Cantonment, the home ministry confirmed. BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman, also a candidate from Dhaka-17 and Bogura-6, will cast his vote at Gulshan Model School and College centre in the Gulshan area.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir will vote at Thakurgaon Government Girls' High School centre.

Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman, who is contesting from Dhaka-15, will vote at Monipur High School (Boy's section) in Dhaka's 60 feet area.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 7



The pillars of a walkway on the bank of the Turag river in Gabtoli, Dhaka, have eroded, exposing the iron rods inside. The structure risks collapse unless urgent repairs are carried out. Aggravating the damage, boats are illegally anchored to the weakened pillars. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1

Let people decide who they want in power: speakers

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

A free, fair and peaceful election in Bangladesh today is a must for the future of the country's democracy and national security, academics and civil society members said yesterday.

They said the election is consequential for the country as it comes after a mass uprising to end discrimination and restore democracy and human rights for all.

"We are really expecting a free, fair and violence-free election and that the parties will accept the result, whoever wins it," said Dhaka University former vice-chancellor Prof Anwarullah Chowdhury at a discussion organised by the Foundation for Strategic and Development Studies (FSDS) and Citizens' Forum at a city hotel.

FSDS Chairman Maj Gen (ret'd) Fazle Elahi Akbar said a proper election is being held in Bangladesh after 17 years, during which around five crore young voters will cast their franchise.

"Let the people decide whom they want in power," he added.

Dhaka University former professor Dr Mahub Ullah said even though the Awami League is not participating in the polls, voter turnout is likely to exceed 60 percent. If that is so, it will be an acceptable election to the international community, he added.

Let people

FROM PAGE 3

"The only request is that whichever party wins the election should be accepted by the ones defeated," he said.

After the formation of the government, the focus should be on strengthening state institutions, restructuring the economy, reviving the dignity of the nation, and ensuring its sovereignty and independence, he added.

North South University Vice-Chancellor Prof Abdul Hannan Chowdhury said the new government must uphold the spirit of the July uprising and focus on employment generation for youths.

Rear Admiral M Khaled Iqbal (ret), former vice-chancellor of Bangladesh Maritime University, said the country must uphold the path of moderation, not extremism, in an age of globalisation where all countries are interdependent.

"Bangladesh will definitely be dependent on international trade as well as funding. The developed countries consider the values of gender equality and democratic values when supporting other countries, something that Bangladesh needs to remember," he said.

Former inspector general of police Mazharul Haque said there are three stages of security during the polls: pre-election, election day and post-election.

"Preventing any sort of violence after the polls will be of paramount importance," he stressed.

Dhaka University Prof Sukomal Barua stressed the need to ensure the security of religious and ethnic minorities during the election.

FBCCI former vice-president Abul Kashem Haider said, "We urge the political parties to ensure a fair and peaceful election for our future democracy and development."

FSDS Principal Research Fellow Dr Ishraf Hossain moderated the discussion.

WB okays

FROM PAGE 3

services to 5.5 lakh people and improve solid waste management for 5 lakh.

"Waterbodies are the lifeline for millions in greater Dhaka. But rapid, unplanned urbanisation and industrial growth have outpaced the city's capacity to manage wastewater and pollution," said Jean Pesme, World Bank division director for Bangladesh and Bhutan.

Only about 20 percent of Dhaka residents currently have piped sewer connections, while more than 80 percent of untreated wastewater is discharged into waterways.

Over half of the city's canals have either disappeared or remain clogged.

The industrial sector also contributes significantly to the crisis. More than 7,000 factories discharge an estimated 2,400 million litres of untreated wastewater daily.

The programme will mobilise private sector participation to expand industrial effluent treatment and promote water reuse.

Harsh Goyal, senior water supply and sanitation specialist at the World Bank, said the first phase will prioritise developing a comprehensive water quality index and introducing digital real-time monitoring for four major Dhaka rivers.

The initial phase will cover selected areas in Dhaka and Narayanganj, focusing on upgrading recycling systems and enforcing pollution-control measures to stop solid waste dumping and direct sewage discharge.



Security personnel inspect a passenger bus in the City Gate area of Chattogram yesterday. With a surge in travellers heading to their respective districts to cast their votes today, authorities have ramped up safety measures to prevent any untoward incidents.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Dhaka may become the bellwether again

FROM PAGE 3

Aman faces Jamaat's Abdul Haq, a former army officer. Despite Haq's rising profile, Aman's development record gives him an edge.

Dhaka-3 (Keraniganj): Once a BNP bastion, it now sees a contest between BNP leader Gayeshwar Chandra Roy and Jamaat's Shahinur Islam. Gayeshwar appears ahead in campaign visibility.

Dhaka-4 (Shyampur-Kadamtali): BNP's Tanveer Ahmed Robin, son of former MP Salahuddin Ahmed, is the frontrunner. He faces Jamaat's Syed Joynul Abedin. Locals believe the newly added 1,00,000 voters will be the ultimate game-changer.

Dhaka-5 (Demra-Jatrabari): Once Khaleda Zia's seat in 1991, it is now riddled with traffic and drug issues. BNP candidate Nabiullah Nabi holds a strong position but faces serious competition from Jamaat and Islami Andolan candidates.

Dhaka-6 (Old Dhaka): Once represented by Sadeque Hossain Khoka, the seat now sees his son, Ishraque Hossain, in the race. The young BNP leader is contesting against Jamaat's Abdul Mannan. In the narrow lanes of Old Dhaka, the result is

expected to hinge largely on the youth vote.

Dhaka-7 (Lalbagh-Chawkbazar): Results here often hinge on the backing of business leaders. Both BNP's Hamidur Rahman and Jamaat's Enayetullah are businessmen. Internal friction within the BNP, with Ishaq Sarker running as an independent, could split the vote and benefit the Jamaat candidate.

Dhaka-8 (Ramna-Motijheel): One of the most talked-about seats nationwide. BNP veteran Mirza Abbas faces young NCP candidate Nasiruddin Patwari, with their social media exchanges shaping much of the campaign narrative. Locals believe Abbas's longstanding influence gives him an edge.

Dhaka-9 (Khilgaon-Basabo): The race features BNP's Habibur Rashid against independent candidate Dr Tasnim Jara. While Habib relies on party machinery, Jara's popularity has turned it into a tight race.

Dhaka-10 (Dhanmondi): Often seen as a bellwether seat. BNP's Sheikh Rabiul Alam is contesting against Jamaat's Jasim Uddin Sarker. With 63,000 new voters added, the outcome remains uncertain.

Dhaka-11 (Rampura-

Badda-Vatara): NCP convener and July uprising figure Nahid Islam faces BNP's MA Quayum. The contest reflects a clash between revolutionary sentiment and administrative experience.

Dhaka-12 (Farmgate-Tejgaon): Dubbed the "Battle of the Saifuls", independent candidate (and expelled BNP leader) Saiful Alam Nirab competes against BNP-backed Saiful Huq and Jamaat's Saiful Alam Milton. Nirab's local influence makes the contest more complex.

Dhaka-13 (Mohammadpur): A constituency with a diverse demographic mix. BNP's Bobby Hajaj faces Mamunul Huq of Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis, backed by the Jamaat-led alliance.

Dhaka-14 (Mirpur-1): A three-way contest among BNP's Sanjida Islam Tulee, Jamaat's Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem Arman, and independent Abu Bakar Siddique Saju, an expelled BNP leader. While BNP appears organisationally strong, Arman's past enforced disappearance has generated sympathy, and Saju maintains local influence.

Dhaka-15 (Mirpur-Kafrul): A high-profile contest as Jamaat Ameer

Dr Shafiqur Rahman takes on BNP's Saiful Islam Khan Milton. For Jamaat, this is a prestige battle, heightening the stakes.

Dhaka-16 (Pallabi-Rupnagar): Former footballer Aminul Haque represents the BNP against Jamaat's Abdul Baten, a former army officer. With the Awami League absent, both parties are vying to consolidate the vacant political space.

Dhaka-17 (Gulshan-Banani): All eyes are on this constituency, where BNP Chairperson Tarique Rahman is contesting against Jamaat's Dr SM Khaliduzzaman. Tarique's candidacy has energised supporters, though Khaliduzzaman's year-long social outreach keeps the contest competitive.

Dhaka-18 (Uttara): BNP's SM Jahangir Hossain faces NCP's Ariful Islam Adeb. The race reflects the divide between upscale Uttara and the underserved areas of Uttarkhan and Dakshinkhan. Joint efforts by Jamaat and NCP have boosted Adeb's visibility against BNP's organisational strength.

Dhaka-19 (Savar-Ashulia): The largest electorate, with 7,47,000 voters. BNP's Dewan Mohammad Salahuddin

contests against NCP's Dilshana Parul. The large industrial workforce is likely to shape the outcome.

Dhaka-20 (Dhamrai): A contest between BNP veteran Tamiz Uddin and NCP's young candidate Nabila Tasnid. The race symbolises a broader clash between established political networks and youthful aspirations.

SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK
Overall, the BNP appears strong in several constituencies due to heavyweight candidates and organisational depth. However, the Jamaat-led alliance has mounted serious challenges in multiple seats.

This contest in Dhaka is beyond a routine electoral battle. It reflects a broader struggle between established political forces and emerging aspirations.

Badiul Alam Majumdar said, "Bangladeshi politics has changed significantly. If the youth who joined the mass uprising vote with that same spirit, their impact will be substantial. Growing religious sentiment and the perspectives of women voters will also influence outcomes."

Old political formulas may not fully explain today's reality, he added.

Feels like Eid holidays

FROM PAGE 3

Although metro rail services and public buses are operating, the number of passengers using both has dropped significantly.

Only a few shops, business centres and offices were found open, while all educational institutions remained closed due to the election holidays.

Some commuters faced difficulty finding transport as services operated with reduced frequency due to low demand and election-related movement restrictions.

Motorcycle movement has been prohibited nationwide from midnight on February 10 until midnight on February 13 as part of election security measures, contributing further to the quieter streets.

Mohammad Farid, a cosmetic shop vendor at Farmgate, said he closed his shop early to travel to Bhola to cast his vote.

"Though I initially had no intention of voting, I am going this time as there is a festive mood surrounding the election. I want to cast my vote for my preferred candidate," he said.

Many residents described the capital's atmosphere as peaceful and festive.

"I am enjoying the city today as it has a flavour of peace. I can move very easily around Farmgate, which usually remains extremely

crowded," said Asma Akhtar, a private sector employee whose office remained open despite the holiday.

CNG-run three-wheeler drivers shared similar experiences. Mohammad Sohag said the empty roads felt like Eid holidays.

"Driving on these empty roads is truly interesting. It took only about 10 minutes to travel from Kamalapur to Mohakhali, which usually takes at least 30 minutes on a busy day," he said.

Another CNG driver, Mohammad Ali, said, "I am really enjoying driving in the city today. Moving through these empty roads is hassle-free and comfortable. It took only 30 minutes to come to Farmgate from Sadarghat, which usually takes around one and a half hours."

However, he said he could not travel home to vote due to financial constraints.

"I wished to cast my vote in Noakhali, but I had to drop the plan as it would cost at least Tk 1,000 for the bus fare. I cannot afford that expense right now," he added.

Some vendors at Farmgate kept their shops open as they had no plan to go home to cast their votes.

Jahanara Aktar, a vegetable vendor at West Rajabazar, said she and her family did not go to Mymensingh to vote as it would cost around Tk 10,000.

Where will key leaders

FROM PAGE 3

Jamaat Secretary General Mia Golam Porwar will cast his vote at the No 8 West Shironi Government Primary School centre in Phultala upazila of Khulna.

National Citizen Party Convener Nahid Islam, who is contesting from Dhaka-11, will cast his vote at AKM Rahmat Ullah University College centre in Beraid, Badda.

Among other NCP leaders, Sarjis Alam will vote at Baman Kumar Rakhal Debhat High School centre in Panchagarh; Akhtar Hossain at Bhayerhat Centre A (Tepa Madhupur) in Rangpur's Kaunia; Abdul Hannan Masud at Burir Char Shaheed Ali Ahmed Memorial High School in Hatiya; Asif Mahmud Shojib Bhuyain at Government Laboratory High School in Dhaka's New Market area;

and Hasnat Abdullah at Gopalnagar High School centre in Cumilla.

Islami Andolan Bangladesh Ameer Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim will cast his vote at Bishwaser Hat centre under Charmonai union in Barishal Sadar.

IAB Senior Naye-e-Ameer Syed Muhammad Faizul Karim will vote at Rupatala Lalar Dighirpar Government Primary School centre in Barishal city.

Among other top political leaders, Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis Ameer and Dhaka-13 candidate of the 11 party alliance, Mamunul Haque, will cast his vote at the Government College of Physical Education polling centre in Mohammadpur, the party said.

According to the EC, voting will continue from 7:30am to 4:30pm today.

Local factors may

FROM PAGE 3

"For us, the individual matters more than the party symbol," said Belal Hossain of Halishahar.

Farzana Akhtar Parul said similar sentiments prevailed in Boalkhali and Banshkhali.

"The candidate who gains the advantage of the local vote will win," said Liaquat, a former union chairman.

Voters such as Jasmine Akhtar also emphasised image and accessibility. "We are local people, and we want to vote based on a candidate's image," she said.

In Faridpur-3, BNP candidate Nayeba Yousuf Ahmed is drawing on the enduring popularity of her late father, Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yousuf.

"Kamal Ibne Yousuf still enjoys wide popularity in the area, which gives his daughter a strong chance of victory," said Shahadat Hossain of Halezdangi.

For younger voters, accessibility matters. "We can approach her and talk to her about our problems," said Manjarul Islam, a student from Shyamsundarpur.

Female voters also see symbolic value. "We will vote for her because she is woman," said Rizia Begum of Parchar village.

Her father's long electoral history, elected five times between 1979 and 2018, continues to shape perceptions, showing how family legacy can translate into political capital.

In Mymensingh, eight "rebel" BNP candidates are in the race in eight out of 11

seats in the district, backed by personal image and family backgrounds.

Salman Omar, an ex-member of the BNP district body (now expelled), is one of them.

Ahmed Saifullah, a voter of Nasullah village, said Salman Omar is popular among voters for philanthropic activities, including organising eye camps and distributing relief materials on different occasions during the coronavirus pandemic.

"He has a clean image and has not been involved in any criminal activities. He always lends his hand to the poor and distressed. I want to vote for him," said Saifullah.

Independent candidate Principal Akhtar Sultana, wife of BNP lawmaker late Shamsuddin Ahmed, is also drawing on the local popularity of her late husband.

Abdur Razzaq of Koerychala village in Phulbaria said he will vote for her.

"The development work done by Shamsuddin Ahmed is still in the memory of Phulbaria people. We are still hopeful for the future development of the area by Sultana," said Razzaq.

"The female candidate with a clean image has also attracted the general voters and I also support her," said Abul Hossain of Rajgati village.

[Our correspondents from respective districts contributed to this report.]

Ensure state recognition

FROM PAGE 3

The Islami Andolan Bangladesh's manifesto states that meaningful and honourable representation in political participation and decision-making processes, voter registration, healthcare, and full, non-discriminatory access to social protection for the third gender/Hijra community will be ensured.

The BNP's manifesto mentions prioritising disadvantaged groups for social protection without any discrimination. It, however, does not mention hijras separately.

The NCP's manifesto also does not mention hijras distinctly. It states that legal protection and strict enforcement against all forms of social discrimination and deprivation, as well as education, health, employment, voting rights, skill development, and social protection for persons with disabilities and disadvantaged groups, will be ensured to build a society of equal rights and human dignity.

A top official of a rights organisation working with hijras said, "For decades, hijras have remained neglected. They are not given importance in manifestos. This shows that no one has separate plans for them, even though they are citizens of this country."

Members of the community in different areas said candidates have not been reaching out to

them ahead of the polls.

Tanisha Yasmin Chaiti, 34, a hijra living in Dhaka, said, "No candidate has either reached out to us or made a clear announcement regarding what they will do for us."

Chaiti mentioned that a notification was issued in 2013, based on which the drafting of a law under the Ministry of Social Welfare had progressed significantly.

However, it was never passed as a bill in the Parliament. "Our only main demand was a strong law with a state foundation, so that the benefits we have received from various state institutions are maintained consistently," she said.

Light House, an NGO working with hijras, reported last October that the Department of Social Services introduced a monthly allowance for hijras of Tk 650 per person. Up until that time, the number of beneficiaries was only 3,500.

However, according to the 2022 census by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the number of hijras in the country is 12,629, while private estimates suggest the number exceeds 50,000.

A large portion of the hijra community has not been able to become voters. According to Election Commission data, the total number of hijra voters in the country for this election is 1,220 across 272 of the 300 constituencies, including 114 in Dhaka.

DU move to promote

FROM PAGE 6

Niaz Ahmed Khan, approved a report recommending promotion of 187 officials. On Tuesday, the syndicate also accepted applications for reconsideration from another 20 officials.

Several officials at the Registrar's Office said the Promotion Board is scheduled to interview applicants on February 16 and 17. If its recommendations are endorsed by the syndicate, the promotions will take effect thereafter.

Some administrative officials warned that implementation of the initiative would raise the university's annual salary expenditure by around Tk 3.5 crore.

Registrar Munshi Shams Uddin Ahmed said the DU Officers' Association had submitted a list of 187 officials who were deprived of promotion over the last 15 years.

"When it was sent to the vice-chancellor, he formed a technical committee," he said.

"The committee's report was placed before the syndicate, and later the syndicate issued us certain directives. We are proceeding according to those directives," he added.

Officers' Association General Secretary Sarwar Hossain said administrative staff had long suffered under the existing promotion framework.

"We have long been deprived due to the current promotion policy. Teachers of this university get 100

percent promotion, whereas we get only one-third," he said.

"So we applied to the vice-chancellor for special promotion so that those who have long been deprived can be promoted. That is why we sought special promotion for 187 officials," he added.

Registrar Munshi Shams further said many of the applicants were already drawing salaries under the pay scale of deputy registrar or equivalent posts.

"This will mainly be an upgrade of designation. Since they have been working in their respective posts for a long time, they have already reached this grade. Their increment will increase slightly," he said.

Asked about the issue at a press conference, VC Prof Niaz said the move was aimed at addressing past deprivation.

"This is a general decision; many government offices have done this," he said. "Like other government offices, if anyone has been deprived, we have decided to promote them once under certain conditions. However, the number of officials to be promoted has not yet been finalised," he added.

PRAYER TIMING
FEBRUARY 12

Fajr	Zohr	Asr	Maghrib	Esha
AZAN 5:25	12:45	4:30	5:57	7:15
JAMAAT 6:00	1:15	4:45	6:01	7:45

SOURCE: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION



Protesters fire fireworks while clashing with riot police during an anti-government protest in Tirana, Albania, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

CEC assures people of free

FROM PAGE 1

the polling stations in a festive spirit, vote for the candidate of your choice, and accept victory and defeat as the natural outcome of the democratic process," he said.

The CEC requested all concerned to set aside personal inconveniences and cooperate to make the national election a success. He urged people to assist election officials, judicial and executive magistrates, and law enforcement agencies in preventing any untoward incidents.

"We want to hold the election in a peaceful and festive atmosphere," he said, expressing hope that collective efforts would ensure a fair, credible and orderly vote.

Describing voting as both a civil right and a responsibility, he called on political parties, candidates and voters to remain responsible and maintain peace and harmony.

Earlier in the day, while briefing international observers and

media representatives at Hotel InterContinental in the capital, Nasir Uddin reaffirmed the Election Commission's commitment to holding a free, fair, impartial and acceptable election.

"The elections will be held as promised to the people," he said.

He added that the commission has completed all preparations in accordance with the constitution and relevant laws for today's election and referendum.

All necessary materials, including ballot papers, have already been distributed to returning officers and are being sent to respective constituencies, he said.

"Extensive security and coordination arrangements are in place with the support of law enforcement agencies and the government," he added, noting that any electoral disputes would be resolved in line with legal and constitutional procedures.

Over 100,000 fled Sudan's Kordofan since October: UN

AFP, Khartoum

More than 100,000 people have fled Sudan's embattled Kordofan since October, the United Nations said on Tuesday, as fighting escalates across the vast southern region.

Since April 2023, Sudan has been engulfed in a brutal war between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

The conflict has killed tens of thousands of people, displaced over 11 million and triggered what the UN describes as one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

Data from the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) on Tuesday showed that an estimated 115,223 people were displaced from Kordofan between October 25 and February 5.

Security measures unprecedented

FROM PAGE 1

professionalism, impartiality, and responsibility to regain public trust," he said at a media briefing on Tuesday, highlighting the growing importance of cyber intelligence and social media monitoring.

Responding to a question on whether any specific threat had prompted what appears to be the largest security arrangement in recent memory, IGP Baharul said, "It is not about a threat. The matter is that we want to hold a historic election -- the safest in our history. That is the intent of the government. That is why we have taken greater preparations."

Home Adviser Lt Gen (retired) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury said that all law enforcement agencies have been placed on high alert to prevent violence and sabotage.

During a visit to the Central Control Room at Police Headquarters, Jahangir warned that security forces have been empowered to enter any location, including polling centres, if necessary, to prevent violence. "Every citizen will be protected."

BGB has launched special patrols in strategic and sensitive areas. BGB Director General Maj

Gen Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman Siddiqui has directed the force's personnel to firmly resist any attempt to create violence, sabotage, or chaos.

Vigilance has been particularly heightened along the Myanmar border to mitigate security risks linked to the Rohingya situation and to prevent illegal infiltration. The force is also using helicopters, drones, K 9 units, and quick response teams to monitor the situation.

In Dhaka alone, 26,515 police personnel are on duty.

DMP's Deputy Commissioner Talebur Rahman said specialised units, including SWAT, K 9 Unit, the Bomb Disposal Unit, and the Crime Scene Unit, are on standby. "There is no specific threat, but we are on the highest alert," he told reporters yesterday at the DMP Media Centre on Minto Road.

Rab DG AKM Shahidur Rahman, during a visit to several polling centres in Lalmatia, Manik Mia Avenue, and Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, said the force has completed its preparations so that people can exercise their voting rights without fear.

'Don't pay heed to propaganda'

FROM PAGE 1

Uddin Pradhan was detained at Syedpur Airport in Nilphamari with a large amount of cash.

In a post made around 2:00pm, it was stated, "At a time when the nation is preparing for a free, fair, and credible election, some are spreading various forms of disinformation across the country. Frightened by Jamaat's popularity and public support, a group is engaged in such attempts to mislead voters. We urge everyone not to pay heed to such propaganda."

In the same post, Shafiqur said, "Voting is your right and a sacred responsibility. Cast your vote for the candidate and symbol of your choice. The entire nation expects this."

Earlier in the morning, in a post urging women voters to turn up at polling centres in large numbers, he said, "Empower yourselves in state governance through exercising your voting rights. A society that fails to uphold the dignity of women can never prosper. If we come to power, women will not just remain within households but will proudly lead in

the mainstream of society.

"From the corporate world to politics, their talents will be valued everywhere without discrimination. We promise to build a country where no mother or sister will have to suffer from insecurity."

In another post describing Gen Z as the "heroes of the July revolution", he said, "Through your courage and sacrifice, an atmosphere for a festive election has been created after a long time. Tomorrow, it is time for you to lead once again. Through a voting revolution, let the world know that you are the architects of a new Bangladesh."

In a similar post in the evening, he told young voters, "Tomorrow is your day. You have earned this day with your blood. So, stand firm in line; do not fear any intimidation or threats. Cast your vote with confidence."

"Tomorrow, you are going to make history. Capture the memorable moments of the day in photos and videos and spread them online to let the world know about this 'voting festival'."

In another post, the Jamaat chief

alleged that at least 13 election offices were vandalised in several areas of his constituency, Dhaka-15. "Those who still try to stop us through terrorism and intimidation are forgetting that this nation has moved past July."

"The politics of muscle power has ended. People can no longer be suppressed. Those who have failed to engage in discussions on national policies and future planning are now resorting to violence."

Also yesterday, Shafiqur met representatives of two election observation missions from China and Japan at Jamaat's central office in Moghbazar.

Since the start of election campaigning on January 22, the Jamaat ameer has addressed at least 62 rallies. He travelled to some by road and to others by helicopter.

In his speeches, he not only sought votes but also appeared to build a political narrative against BNP, which he described as his party's main rival.

He is scheduled to cast his vote today at 8:00am at Monipur High School (Boys' Section) polling centre in the Mirpur 60 Feet area.

'Cash seizures' infringing on

FROM PAGE 2

He also said judicial magistrates are being sent to the field without basic facilities. "Many magistrates have told us they were not given even minimum transport or security."

He warned that this could prevent quick action against centre-grabbing or irregularities.

Asif also accused a section of the media of returning to biased reporting. "We are observing that some media in Bangladesh are again taking partisan positions -- spreading misinformation and disinformation by helping specific groups."

Warning media owners and editors, he said, "Present accurate information. Do not show bias. After August 5, we showed patience and gave space. But after this election, there will be no more concessions."

"We are noting those who block one side's news, frame another side differently, or spread propaganda. After February 12, accountability will begin."

At another emergency press briefing later in the night, Asif alleged that irregularities had already begun.

He pointed to incidents of cash seizures in various areas and alleged attempts to occupy polling centres in constituencies, including Noakhali-6, Kurigram-2, Comilla-4, and Dhaka-11.

Asif urged law enforcement agencies to remain vigilant and called on the public, particularly young voters, to report any irregularities on social media. "If mainstream media fails to cover these incidents, alternative channels should be used to circulate information."

He also called on citizens to exercise their right to vote, warning that fear and intimidation could undermine democracy.

"If voters are scared into staying away from the polls, Bangladesh risks slipping back into the dark days..."

Rule of law

FROM PAGE 1

friendly environment.

In international cooperation, Tarique would prioritise partnerships with Gulf Cooperation Council countries, especially Saudi Arabia -- home to more than 3 million Bangladeshis -- with whom strong commercial relations were established during his father late president Ziaur Rahman's rule, and which would likely be one of the first countries he would visit if he became prime minister.

"The highest number of Bangladeshi migrant workers are employed in Saudi Arabia, and the remittances they send significantly contribute to our economy," he said.

"I admire the Saudi Vision 2030, and I am sincerely looking forward to working with the leadership of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia ... I would definitely like to visit Saudi Arabia early in my term. Personally, I also wish to visit the holy mosque, Al-Masjid Al-Haram, Makkah, to perform Umrah," Tarique said.

In relations with other countries, especially the regional powers India and Pakistan, the BNP's policy would be guided by national interest, which "is not about any specific country," he said.

"We want good relations with all our foreign friends, particularly our neighbours. We are committed to building relations of equality, cooperation and friendship with our neighbors. The foundation of that relationship will be mutual respect and understanding, which will ensure our collective progress," the BNP leader said.

Cast votes

FROM PAGE 1

maintain restraint, tolerance and democratic conduct on polling day.

"This is not just an election or a constitutional process; rather, it is an important juncture that will reflect the country's future state system, democratic trends and the sovereign will of the people," the chief adviser said.

He said the referendum would allow citizens to express their views on the future structure of the state and system of governance, while the parliamentary election would enable them to choose competent and responsible representatives who respect the people's aspirations.

Describing the vote as the institutional expression of the people's democratic aspirations and self-respect, he noted that many citizens had long been deprived of their voting rights. Thanks to the July uprising, people would now directly take part in shaping state governance, he added.

"We must especially remember that, in this vote, a large number of young voters are getting the opportunity to exercise their constitutional voting rights for the first time," Yunus said.

He added, "It is our moral and constitutional responsibility to ensure that this referendum and parliamentary election become a joyful, fear-free and credible democratic experience for every voter."

He urged the administration, the Election Commission, the armed forces and law enforcement agencies to perform their duties with professionalism and impartiality so that every citizen can vote without intimidation, pressure or influence.

"Your active participation in this historic democratic journey will help us move forward together toward a peaceful, stable, inclusive and democratic Bangladesh," he concluded.

Cash recoveries, centre intrusions mark polls eve

FROM PAGE 16

to work as a polling officer, was arrested with over Tk 7 lakh in cash from the election office of a Jamaat-nominated candidate in the Boishakhpara area of the district headquarters.

A mobile court sentenced Golam to two years' imprisonment, Lucky Das, assistant commissioner of Naria upazila administration, said, adding that his political identity, however, could not be known.

Earlier in the day, a team of army personnel intercepted and seized a microbus carrying Tk 10.48 lakh in cash in the Abdul Barihar area of Chattogram's Chandanaish upazila, said Md Eliash Khan, OC of Chandanaish Police Station.

Contacted, he said the army handed over the seized cash and the vehicle to the police station around 1:30am. Preliminary information suggests the seized money may belong to an independent candidate, but the matter is yet to be confirmed.

A video that went viral on social media shows a man standing beside a microbus, surrounded by army personnel, counting cash. When asked about his identity, the man identified himself as the "estate manager" of Mizanul Haque Chowdhury.

Sources said Mizanul is contesting from the Chattogram-14 constituency as an independent candidate with the football symbol.

The Daily Star could not reach him by phone despite repeated attempts.

In Cumilla's Muradnagar upazila, police detained local Jamaat leader Habibur Rahman Helali with cash from the Neamat Kandi area at noon yesterday, said Muradnagar Upazila Nirbahi Officer Md Abdur Rahman.

He, however, could not confirm Helali's party post or the amount of money seized.

According to the UNO, locals caught Helali around noon with the money, alleging that he was trying to buy votes.

Contacted by this newspaper, Muradnagar Police Station OC Zahidur Rahman said, "He is now in police custody and legal action will be taken upon directives from the administration."

In a separate incident in Khatra village in the district's Chaudhagram upazila, police detained two BNP men for distributing money along with voters' slips around 9:00am, said Mozammel Haque, assistant sub-inspector of Konkapoita police outpost.

In the same upazila, two Chhatra Dal activists were fined Tk 2,000 each for distributing money at Chapachouk village yesterday afternoon, said Chaudhagram UNO Md Nurul Amin.

In Jamalpur's Madarganj upazila, a mobile court sentenced three persons to one month's imprisonment each and fined Tk 5,000 each on the charge of distributing money among voters in South Para area yesterday afternoon.

"They are supporters of independent candidate for Jamalpur-3 constituency Sadikur Rahman Siddiki," said Madarganj UNO Sumon Chowdhury.

Sadikur could not be reached by phone despite repeated attempts. However, in a post on Facebook, he claimed that the incident was a conspiracy against him.

In Laxmipur, an army team detained a close aide to BNP's Joint Secretary General and Laxmipur-4 candidate Shahid Uddin Chowdhury Anee for carrying Tk 15 lakh in a vehicle last evening.

The detainee was identified as Anee's cousin, Badrul Alam Shyamal.

The army intercepted the car in Jhumur Golchatter area of the district headquarters, seized the money, and detained Shyamal, said Laxmipur Superintendent of Police Mohammad Abu Tareq.

Upon initial interrogation, Shyamal said the money was being taken to be distributed among the party's polling agents.

Later, he was served with a show-cause notice and replied within 30 minutes, giving the same explanation.

Shyamal was later released with the money, the SP added.

In the capital's Korail slum, a scuffle broke out between female activists of BNP and Jamaat. One Jamaat activist was reportedly injured.

Banani police OC Khalid Monsur told The Daily Star, "Female activists of Jamaat were holding a discussion with their polling agents. Hearing the news, some female supporters of BNP went there to obstruct them, leading to a scuffle.... Action will be taken if a complaint is filed."

In Patuakhali's Kalapara, a Coast Guard team detained Joint Convener of Kalapara municipality Swechhasebak Dal Kajol Mridha with Tk 50 lakh.

Police said several BNP leaders and activists entered the Demra Shamsul Haque Khan School polling centre around 6:30pm along with the school's principal, Mahbubur Molla.

On receiving the information, Jamaat leaders and activists gathered in front of the school, leading to tensions. Police later went to the spot and brought the situation under control.

Meanwhile, in Dhaka-16 constituency, a mobile court sentenced two individuals -- Abu Raihan and Mehedi Hasan -- to two years' imprisonment each for forcibly entering the Mirpur Shaheed Smriti High School polling centre.

In Gopalganj-2 and -3, at least seven crude bomb explosions were reported near different polling centres after 8:00pm.

Gopalganj Additional Deputy Commissioner Sarwar Hossain said no casualties were reported.

In Chattogram city, a heated altercation broke out between Jamaat's Chattogram-8 candidate Dr Abu Naser and local BNP activists when he visited the Khalashi Pukurpar Government Primary School polling centre under Bahaddarhat Police Station at night.

The situation was later brought under control by police and army personnel.

In Bogura's Dhunat upazila, Milon Mia, 25, president of Dhunat Government Degree College Chhatra Dal, was stabbed in front of a polling centre around 8:00pm, police confirmed.

In Cumilla's Debidwar, eight supporters of NCP and Jamaat were sentenced to two days' imprisonment each by a mobile court following unrest at the Padmakot polling centre, said Debidwar police OC Md Moniruzzaman, adding that the sentences were handed down on the spot to bring the situation under control.

He said that although the identities could not yet be confirmed, the individuals were believed to be supporters of NCP, Jamaat, and the local BNP.

In Barishal's Babuganj upazila, two BNP activists were detained with more than Tk 1 lakh last night, hours before the election. Commanding Officer of the Army's 62 East Bengal, Lieutenant Colonel Faiz Ahmed, said that as part of ongoing election security operations, two motorcycle riders were detained in Madhabpasha area in the afternoon.

After a search, Tk 1,02,000 in cash and election-related slips were recovered from them. They were later handed over to Babuganj Police Station.

In Salimunnesa Girls' School polling centre in Kaliganj of Jhenidah-4, the administration seized 23 blank result sheets signed in advance by a polling agent last night.

Following the incident, presiding officer Jesmin Ara, an assistant engineer of the Department of Public Health Engineering, was withdrawn from duty.

New result sheets were supplied, confirmed District Returning Officer and Magistrate Abdullah Masud.

The seizure took place around 8:30pm in the presence of Executive Magistrate Selim Reza, Upazila Nirbahi Officer and Assistant Returning Officer Rizwana Nahid, journalists, police, and members of the army.

Magistrate Selim explained that agents of different candidates had come to submit appointment documents when the presiding officer asked them to sign blank result sheets in advance to "speed up the process".

He termed it "a mistake on part of the presiding officer", noting that Jesmin admitted the error.

Selim added that complaints from other agents prompted verification by the upazila nirbahi officer and assistant returning officer, leading to the discovery and reporting of the irregularity.

District Returning Officer Masud confirmed Jesmin Ara's withdrawal for negligence in duty and said a new presiding officer had already been appointed.

Meanwhile, tensions erupted at a polling centre in Siddhirganj of Narayanganj following allegations by a BNP candidate that Jamaat leaders and activists, with the support of a polling officer, attempted to seal ballot papers on Wednesday night.

The Jamaat candidate, however, denied the allegation.

The incident took place at Dhanakunda Popular High School polling centre in Godnail area under Siddhirganj area of Narayanganj-3 constituency.

(Our district correspondents contributed to the report.)

DU move to promote 200 officials draws flak

DU CORRESPONDENT

The Dhaka University (DU) administration has initiated a move to promote more than 200 assistant registrars and equivalent officials – a step that has triggered concerns over possible violations of the university's existing promotion rules.

According to the University Employees Recruitment and Promotion Policy-2020, only one-third of the total sanctioned posts of assistant registrar can be promoted to the rank of deputy registrar each year.

However, sources at the Registrar Building said the current initiative seeks to promote 207 officials, far exceeding the permissible limit.

Officials

familiar with the matter said under the policy, only 21 assistant registrars or equivalent officers are eligible for promotion annually. At the DU Registrar's Office, there are 12 sanctioned assistant registrar posts, of which one-third, or four officials, may be promoted each year. Outside the Registrar's Office, there are 51 equivalent posts, making 17 officials eligible annually.

Despite this ceiling, the administration has moved ahead with a large scale promotion plan.

Following the political changeover in 2024, the Registrar's Office invited applications for promotion in February 2025. Officials said many employees were deprived of promotion during the Awami League regime, which prompted the current initiative.

Although steps were taken to draft a new promotion policy, it has yet to be implemented. In the meantime, a syndicate meeting held on February 1, chaired by Vice-Chancellor Prof



SEE PAGE 4 COL 7

Tea worker found dead

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Police recovered the body of a tea worker with his hands and feet tied from a tea garden in Kamalganj upazila of Moulvibazar yesterday.

The deceased was identified as Ratan Shuvo Kar, 28, a worker at Champara Tea Garden under Islampur union, said Kamalganj Police Station Officer-in-Charge Abdul Awal.

Locals spotted the body around 10:00am and alerted police.

Locals said the body bore visible injury marks and was found bloodied. Some residents suspected that Ratan may have been killed elsewhere and the body later dumped in the garden.

Ratan's elder brother, Laxman Kar, said the family had been searching for him since the previous night.

"This [yesterday] morning, we were informed that his body was lying in the garden. We went there and identified him. We do not know why he was killed," he said.

The body was sent to Moulvibazar Sadar Hospital for autopsy. Police said an investigation is underway.



Under army supervision, a drill was held at Bell's Park ground in Barishal city to deal with emergency situations during today's national election and referendum. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

Long walks, long wait for Rangamati voters

RIKORS CHAKMA, Rangamati

Voters in remote areas of Rangamati face daunting journeys to cast their ballots, with many forced to walk for hours or even stay overnight near polling centres, in some cases a day before voting, due to long distances and a lack of transport.

The problem is most acute in Baghaichhari, Barkal, Belaichhari and Juraichhari upazilas, where polling stations are located far from scattered hill villages, according to locals and election officials.

In several areas, voters must walk four to five hours to reach a polling centre, discouraging turnout and adding to the hardship of participating in the election.

According to the district election office, Rangamati has 20 polling stations classified as remote—six in Baghaichhari, two in Barkal, seven in Juraichhari and five in Belaichhari.

Election materials and officials are transported to and from these centres by helicopter.

More than 30,000 voters are registered at these polling stations.

Jaupui Thang Tripura, headman of Sealdai Mouza in Sajek union of Baghaichhari, the district's largest upazila, told The Daily Star that walking is the only option for most voters in remote areas.

"It takes a full day to reach the polling station and another day to vote and return," he said. "People have to go a day before the election and spend the night nearby."

Pratimani Chakma of the Hagra Kijing area in Sajek described the journey as exhausting and demoralising.

"We leave around 6:00am and reach the polling station around 10:00am or 11:00am," she said. "Even after all that effort to vote, no one checks on us afterwards."

remains a major challenge in the district.

According to the returning officer's office, 161 of Rangamati's 213 polling stations have no mobile network or internet access, while 36 centres have no electricity.

Rangamati Returning Officer and



Sometimes I wonder whether it is worth going through such hardship."

Shanti Kumar Chakma, a resident of Moidong union in Juraichhari, said voters often return home late at night after voting.

"If someone is delayed, they may have to spend the night on the way and return home the next day," he said.

Transporting election logistics also

Deputy Commissioner Nazma Ashrafi said the lack of connectivity makes communication with election officials and the transmission of results difficult.

"To address this, we have decided to transmit results using the wireless systems of the security forces stationed at those centres," she said. "For the 36 centres without electricity, upazila nirbahi officers have been instructed to arrange temporary alternative power supplies."



Teesta plan takes centre stage in river basin seats

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

The long-stalled Teesta Mega Plan has once again emerged as a central election issue for hundreds of thousands of voters across 10 Teesta river basin constituencies in five northern districts – Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Rangpur, Gaibandha and Nilphamari.

Candidates from nearly all political parties contesting three seats in Lalmonirhat, three in Kurigram, two in Rangpur, and one each in Nilphamari and Gaibandha have pledged to implement the plan in their election manifestos.

BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami candidates, in particular, have placed the project at the top of their agendas, stepping up campaign activities in river-adjacent char areas to court Teesta riverbank voters.

At election rallies in Rangpur and Nilphamari, BNP Chairperson Tarique Rahman said, "If BNP comes to power, the Teesta Mega Plan will be implemented."



Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Dr Shafiqur Rahman made a similar pledge at rallies across Rangpur, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat and Nilphamari, saying, "If Jamaat comes to power, work on the Teesta Mega Plan will be started first of all."

Repeated promises over the years, however, have left many riverbank residents deeply sceptical. For them, the Teesta Mega Plan has become a familiar election refrain that fades once polls are over.

Farmer Mohir Uddin, 70, of Char Gokunda in Lalmonirhat Sadar, said politicians have repeatedly deceived them. "The interim government also deceived us. It announced that work on the Teesta Mega Plan would begin in January 2026, but it did not happen," he said.

Monwara Begum, 58, an agricultural labourer from Char Gobordhan in Aditmari upazila, said erosion by the Teesta has cost her family their land and home. "We have been hearing stories of saving the Teesta for 20 years, but no one has done anything," she said.

Jamaat candidate Firoz Hayder Lavlu of Lalmonirhat-2 said implementation of the plan is a "clear commitment" of his party.

NCP candidate Akhtar Hossen from Rangpur-4 (Kaunia-Pirgachha) said, "I am a son of the Teesta shoal. No one knows the suffering and pain surrounding the Teesta more than I do. If an II-party alliance government is formed, the Teesta Mega Plan will be implemented on a priority basis. This is my election commitment."

BNP candidate Asadul Habib Dulu of Lalmonirhat-3 said, "If BNP comes to power with the people's mandate, the Teesta Mega Plan will be implemented. This is both my party's promise and my election manifesto."

Six killed, 17 hurt in road accidents

STAR REPORT

Six people were killed and at least 17 others injured in road accidents in three districts yesterday and the day before, according to reports from our correspondents.

In Sherpur, two people – including an assistant presiding officer assigned to the 13th National Parliamentary Election – were killed and three others injured when a mini-truck collided head-on with a CNG-run auto-rickshaw in Sadar upazila yesterday morning.

The deceased were identified as Roknuzzaman Rukon, 31, a junior instructor at Sherpur Polytechnic Institute, and Mahfuza Khatun, 19, a resident of Katlamari village in Madarganj upazila of Jamalpur.

Rukon, from Sarishabari in Jamalpur, had been appointed assistant presiding officer at Madhabpur Government Primary School centre, confirmed Sherpur Sadar Police Station Officer-in-Charge Sohel Rana.

Quoting locals, the OC said the accident occurred on the Sherpur-Jamalpur regional highway at Shimultoli, injuring five auto-rickshaw passengers. They were rushed to Sherpur General Hospital, where doctors declared the two dead. The three others are undergoing treatment there.

In Bagerhat, two men were killed and three others injured in a head-on collision between a human haulier and a truck on the Khulna-Mongla highway at Chulkhathi

Chaltetola in Sadar upazila on Tuesday. Kader Khan, 27, of Goaler Math village in Mongla, and Lablu Molla, 30, of Doarjara village, died on the spot.

The injured were taken to Khulna Medical College Hospital. Police seized the vehicles, said Katakhal Highway Police Station OC Md Zafar Ahmed.

In Faridpur, two passengers were killed and at least 11 others injured when a bus overturned on the Dhaka-Khulna highway



PHOTO: STAR

The damaged bus after it overturned at Suadi village in Faridpur yesterday.

near a filling station at Suadi village in Bhangra upazila yesterday.

Police said the identities of the deceased could not be known immediately.

Bhangra Fire Service said the bus, operating under the Narail Express line, was travelling from Dhaka to Narail with a full load of passengers. "Two passengers died on the spot. The injured were taken to Bhangra Upazila Health Complex," he said.



A farmer struggles to find enough water to bathe his buffalo in a receding stretch of the Padma. In Rajshahi's Paba upazila, the once-mighty river has withered into a landscape of vast chars and barren sandbanks.

PHOTO: AZAHAR UDDIN

CANADA SCHOOL 10 dead, 27 injured after suspect opens fire

Female shooter
with self-inflicted
injury among the
dead

REUTERS

Ten people including the shooter are dead after an assailant opened fire at a high school in western Canada on Tuesday in one of the country's deadliest mass casualty events in recent history.

The outburst brought to Canada the type of mass shooting more common in the neighbouring United States, and was carried out by a shooter described as female, police said.

Six people were found dead inside a high school in the town of Tumbler Ridge in British Columbia, two more people were found dead at a residence believed to be connected to the incident, and another person died on the way



to hospital, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police said.

At least two other people were hospitalized with serious or life-threatening injuries, and as many as 25 people were being treated for non-life-threatening injuries, police said.

A suspected shooter was also found dead from what appears to be a self-inflicted injury, police said, adding they did not believe there were any more suspects or ongoing threat to the public.

"It's hard to know what to say on a night like tonight. It's the kind of thing that feels like it happens in other places and not close to home," British Columbia Premier David Eby told reporters.

Police released almost no details about the shooter except to say the person was described a female - potentially an unusual development as mass shootings in North America are almost always carried out by men.

A police active shooter alert said the suspect was described "as female in a dress with brown hair." Police Superintendent Ken Floyd later confirmed at a news conference that the suspect described in the alert was the same person found dead in the school.



People fill water containers from a mobile cistern in the Maghazi camp for Palestinian refugees in central Gaza, yesterday. Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas called for a "firm response" from the US and the international community to Israel's plan to tighten its control of the occupied West Bank.

PHOTO: AFP

SECURITY IN THE GULF REGION

Qatar Emir, Trump discuss de-escalation

Iran wont 'give in to excessive demands': Pezeshkian

AGENCIES

Qatar's Emir and US President Donald Trump discussed de-escalation and security in the Gulf region in a call, the royal court said yesterday, after Washington threatened military action against Iran.

Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and Trump focused on "the current situation in the region and international efforts aimed at de-escalation and strengthening regional security and peace", the Emir's office said, in a statement.

They also discussed "supporting diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving crises through dialogue and peaceful means", the statement added.

The US and Iran resumed indirect talks in Oman on Friday, after an American naval group led by an aircraft carrier moved to Middle Eastern waters following Tehran's deadly crackdown on protesters.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian said yesterday that his country would "not yield to excessive demands" on its nuclear programme.

"Our Iran will not yield in the face of aggression, but we are continuing dialogue with all our strength with neighbouring countries in order to establish peace and tranquillity in the region," he said in a speech at Azadi Square in the capital for the 47th anniversary of Iran's Islamic



People walk past a ballistic missile launch vehicle in Tehran during a rally marking the 47th anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

revolution.

He also said that his country is ready for "any verification" of its nuclear programme and insisted Tehran is not seeking an atomic weapon, reports AFP.

Meanwhile, some residents of the Iranian capital Tehran on Tuesday chanted slogans against the Islamic republic and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on the eve of the most significant annual commemoration of the 1979 Islamic revolution, according to footage posted on social media.

Iran was rocked by protests

last month opposing the Islamic republic, which were put down by what activists condemned as an unprecedented crackdown by the authorities.

There had been few reports of significant protest activity over the last fortnight in the face of the crackdown until now. But late Tuesday people took to balconies to chant slogans including "death to Khamenei" and "death to the dictator", according to footage shared by widely followed protest monitor channels on Telegram and X.

GREENLAND ROW

Nato launches 'Arctic Sentry' mission

AFP, Brussels

Nato yesterday said it had launched a new mission to bolster security in the Arctic, in a move to assuage US President Donald Trump after he backed off claims on Greenland.

"Arctic Sentry underscores the alliance's commitment to safeguard its members and maintain stability in one of the world's most strategically significant and environmentally challenging areas," US General Alexus Grynkewich, Nato's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, said.

Nato said the "multi-domain activity" would initially pull together undertakings already being carried out by alliance members in the region such as upcoming exercises by Norway and Denmark.

It remained unclear whether the new mission would involve more military capabilities being sent to the region.

Trump's threats against Greenland last month - which he based on an alleged threat by Russia and China in the Arctic - plunged the transatlantic alliance into its deepest crisis in years.

The US leader backed off his vow to take control of Denmark's autonomous Arctic territory.

US FUEL BLOCKADE

Germany advises against non- essential travel to Cuba

AFP, Berlin

Germany on Tuesday issued an advisory against all non-essential travel to Cuba, where US pressure has created an oil crisis.

The Caribbean nation is reeling from a US-ordered halt in oil shipments from Caracas after American troops captured Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro last month.

"Cuba is facing an acute energy crisis, which is also being compounded by widespread dilapidated energy infrastructure," the German foreign ministry said in the advisory.

The country is facing "significant shortages in energy and fuel supplies, which are affecting all areas of life" including medical care, it said.

The bulletin also noted that aircraft from abroad can currently not be refuelled in Cuba, "resulting in significant restrictions on flight operations", and that "several hotels have already been closed".

"Public transport, street lighting, traffic lights, cash machines, communication and security systems are already severely restricted or may fail," it said.

The oil shortages have threatened to plunge Cuba into complete darkness, with power plants struggling to keep the lights on.

Russian strike kills 3 children, father in Ukraine

REUTERS, Kyiv

A Russian drone crashed into a house in eastern Ukraine, killing three small children and their father, officials said yesterday, in a strike President Volodymyr Zelensky said undermined diplomacy as Washington presses for a peace deal.

The children's pregnant mother was fighting for her life in hospital with severe burns, Prime Minister Yulia Svyrydenko posted on X: "An entire family was wiped out in a single act of Russian terror."

According to local prosecutors, the drone hit the residential building in the town of Bohodukhiv, to the west of Ukraine's second-largest city Kharkiv, late on Tuesday.

"As a result of the strike, the house was completely destroyed and engulfed in flames, and the family was trapped under the rubble," the Kharkiv Region Prosecutor's Office said on the Telegram messaging app yesterday.

Regional governor Oleh Synyehubov described the victims as two 2-year-old boys, a 1-year-old girl and a 34-year-old man. He did not

specify whether the boys were twins. Officials said the family had only just moved into the town. Images posted on Telegram by Ukraine's emergency service showed firefighters battling a blaze in a house, with smoke rising through the wooden beams of the roof.

There was no immediate comment from Russia on the attack. Moscow has denied intentionally targeting civilians during the war although its attacks have killed thousands of them since it invaded at full scale in February 2022. Ukraine has also hit civilian targets in Russia or Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine during the war, though on a far smaller scale.



Trump told police chief 'everyone' knew about Epstein

FBI document reveals

REUTERS

A newly uncovered FBI interview raised new questions about US President Donald Trump's assertion he knew nothing about convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein's crimes, while Trump's commerce secretary, Howard Lutnick, faced a barrage of questions from lawmakers on Tuesday about his own ties to the financier.

The day's developments underscored how the fallout from the Epstein scandal remains a major political headache for the Trump administration, weeks after the Justice Department released millions of Epstein-related files to comply with a bipartisan bill.

The files have also created crises abroad after revealing new details of Epstein's ties to prominent people in politics, finance, business and academia.

In July 2006, as Epstein's first sex crime charges became public, the police chief in Palm Beach, Florida, received a call from Trump, according to the summary of a 2019 FBI interview with the police chief that was among the files.

The police chief, Michael Reiter, cited Trump as having told him: "Thank goodness you're stopping him, everyone has known he's been doing this."

Trump told Reiter that people in New York knew about Epstein and advised him that Ghislaine Maxwell, Epstein's associate, was "evil," according to the document. Trump also said he had once been around Epstein when teenagers were present and that he "got the hell out of there."

Reiter, who retired in 2009, confirmed the details of the FBI interview to the Miami Herald.



Families of detainees gather outside Venezuela's National Assembly as the government pledges an amnesty law to free political prisoners, amid US pressure following Maduro's ouster, in Caracas on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Colombian senator kidnapped President targeted in polls run-up

AFP, Bogota

A Colombian senator was rescued from kidnapers Tuesday as the country's president reported an attempt on his own life in the run-up to elections that observers have warned could be marred by violence.

Senator Aida Quilcue, an award-winning Indigenous activist, was taken by unknown people in her home department of Cauca, a conflict-ridden, coca-growing region fought over by dissidents of the now-disbanded FARC guerrilla army.

The 53-year-old was rescued by a group of Indigenous people, her team reported on X, hours after the vehicle she had been traveling in with two bodyguards was found abandoned.

"I'm OK now," Quilcue said through tears in a video posted by Defense Minister Pedro Sanchez.

Star BUSINESS



Govt to scrap tariffs on 4,500 US products

Tariffs on additional 2,210 products to be eliminated within 10 years

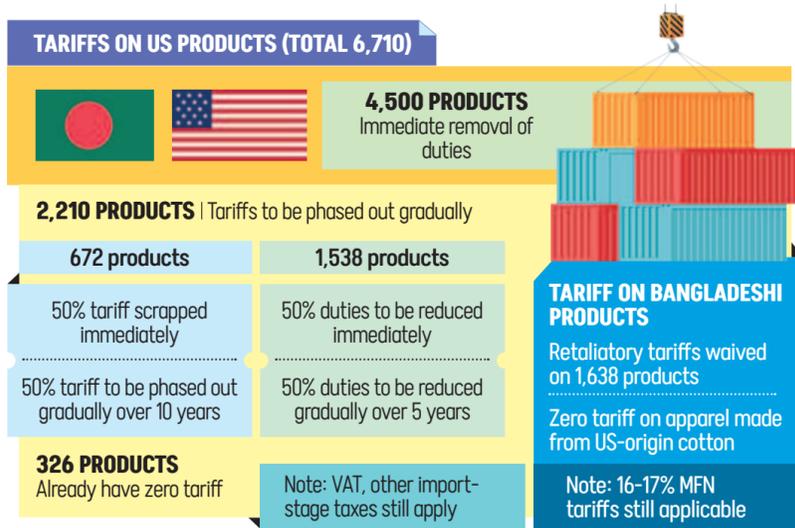
MOHAMMAD SUMAN

Bangladesh has agreed to eliminate customs duties, supplementary duties, and regulatory duties on approximately 4,500 products from the United States as part of the newly signed reciprocal trade agreement, marking one of the most significant tariff reduction measures in recent years.

Besides, tariffs on another 2,210 products will be phased out over varying timelines.

In return, the US has waived retaliatory tariffs on 1,638 Bangladeshi products, including cane and natural fibre, iron and steel, minerals, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, plastics, wood, and apparel made from US cotton. However, the regular most-favoured-nation (MFN) tariffs averaging 16 to 17 percent will still apply on these goods.

Most crucially, the US has reduced the reciprocal tariff rate on Bangladeshi exports by one percent to 19 percent under the deal signed on Monday and later published by the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR). The document contains detailed schedules of concessions based on HS (Harmonized System) codes.



The agreement comes against the backdrop of evolving trade tensions. On April 2, 2025, US President Donald Trump announced retaliatory tariffs on exports from 100 countries. Bangladesh initially faced a 37 percent rate, later reduced to 35 percent in July and to 20 percent in August following negotiations.

As part of this deal, the US has cut its reciprocal tariff on Bangladeshi exports from 20 percent. Including previous duties, the overall tariff burden on Bangladeshi exports to the US currently stands at about 34 percent.

Md Hafizur Rahman, former director general of the WTO Cell at the Ministry of Commerce, said the proposed measure could offer notable tariff advantages for Bangladesh's garment sector.

"If garments are produced using US raw materials, the existing 19 percent reciprocal duty could be reduced to zero. That would be a major benefit for us," he said, adding that it could strengthen Bangladesh's position against competitors.

"Our key competitors, India and Pakistan, have their own cotton. If they import and instead rely on local cotton, domestic prices there may fall, and their farmers could suffer. From that perspective, this is a very positive sign for Bangladesh. It may lead to an increase in our RMG exports," he said.

However, he cautioned that the benefits would come with significant obligations.

"Bangladesh will have to sign 13 new intellectual property rights agreements and conventions for implementation. Enforcement will have to be much stricter, which may limit the flexibilities we enjoyed during the LDC transition period," he said.

Rahman warned that failure to comply could lead to losses and noted concerns over pricing rules.

"If a foreign investor sets up operations in Bangladesh and exports at prices lower than the market rate, and that leads to export losses of US to Bangladesh or any other country, then action may be required. However, it is not entirely clear which 'market price' would be used as a benchmark," he noted.

"In such cases, the United States would inform Bangladesh, and the government would need to take measures. This may create uncertainty for export-oriented investors, as companies will have to consider whether they can price their products below prevailing market rates without triggering complications," he said.

Rahman noted that while US companies generally operate in high-value segments, price competition could still become an issue.

"There are also several additional compliance requirements that Bangladesh will have to fulfil," he added.

US TRADE DEAL IN FOCUS

The tariff waiver on 4,500 goods is effective from the date the deal was signed.

Out of the other 2,210 products where tariffs will be phased out, duties on 1,538 goods have already been reduced by 50 percent from the day the deal was signed. The other 50 percent of the duties will be withdrawn in equal instalments over four years and fully eliminated from January 1 of the fifth year.

In case of the other 672 products, half of the existing tariff will be scrapped initially, while

the remainder will be phased out gradually over nine years and brought down to zero in the tenth year.

Apart from a total of 6,710 products (4,500 and 2,210), Bangladesh already does not impose any tariff on 422 products imported from the US, and that will remain unchanged.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh will continue to apply tariffs on an additional 326 products as per the current tariff schedule.

Despite the sweeping duty cuts, the agreement does not provide exemptions from value-added tax (VAT), advance income tax, or advance tax at the import stage.

Importers will continue to pay these taxes, meaning that while customs-related duties will be withdrawn, revenue collection from other import-stage taxes will remain in place.

According to National Board of Revenue (NBR) data, Bangladesh imported goods worth about \$2.5 billion from the United States in the fiscal year (FY) 2024-25. From these imports, the government collected Tk 762 crore in customs-related duties and Tk 1,220 crore in VAT and advance taxes. Customs, supplementary, and regulatory duties account for roughly 38 percent of total revenue collected from US-origin goods.

The US products covered under the

recently signed agreement span a broad range of sectors.

In agriculture and food, the list includes wheat, corn, soybeans and soybean oil, raw cotton, dairy products, processed foods, animal feed, fruits, and nuts.

In energy and minerals, it covers liquefied natural gas (LNG), mineral fuels, coal, and petrochemical products.

Other key sectors include textiles and industrial raw materials such as yarn and specialised fabrics; chemicals and pharmaceuticals, including industrial chemicals, plastics, fertilisers, and medicines; machinery and industrial equipment such as electrical machinery, agricultural equipment, generators, turbines, and aircraft parts; and iron, steel, and other metal products.

Technology and high-value goods, including electronic components, telecommunications equipment, and scientific instruments, are also covered, alongside consumer goods such as wood and paper products, furniture and household items.

In return, the US has waived retaliatory tariffs on 1,638 Bangladeshi products. These include cane and natural fibre products, iron and steel goods, graphite and mineral items, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, plastics and wood-based products. Apparel made from US-origin cotton will also qualify for zero retaliatory duty, although MFN tariffs – averaging 16 to 17 percent – will remain applicable.

US meat, dairy and biotech to enter on easier terms

Bangladesh will adopt US regulatory standards for food safety, agri-biotechnology

SUKANTA HALDER

Bangladesh has long imported agricultural commodities from abroad. Last year, it became the eighth-largest market for US wheat. Under a reciprocal trade agreement signed on February 9, American dairy, meat and poultry products will get sweeping access to Bangladesh's market.

It also widens the door to agricultural biotechnology products without requiring labelling for genetically modified organisms, a provision that has alarmed Fisheries and Livestock Adviser Farida Akhter.

Domestic producers, already struggling to compete, fear they will be overwhelmed.

US MEAT, MILK AND MORE

The agreement represents a sweeping deregulation of Bangladesh's food-import regime. Bangladesh will recognise America's dairy safety system as providing protection "at least equivalent" to its own domestic standards.

The country will allow imports of American dairy products from cattle (for instance, buffalo), sheep and goats when accompanied by an Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) certificate of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), and has committed not to impose facility registration requirements.

The recognition extends to meat and poultry, including offal, processed products, catfish and egg items.

Bangladesh will accept oversight by the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) of

American production facilities. The FSIS directory will serve as the official list of eligible establishments, eliminating the need for individual American plants to seek separate Bangladeshi approval.

The agreement stipulates that Bangladesh shall "impose no additional product registration or facility registration requirements" on American meat and poultry. It will recognise the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service as the sole authority to determine disease-free statuses.

Additionally, the agriculture ministry will fast-track market access requests for US plant products.

In effect, Bangladesh is outsourcing significant elements of its food-safety regulation to American agencies.

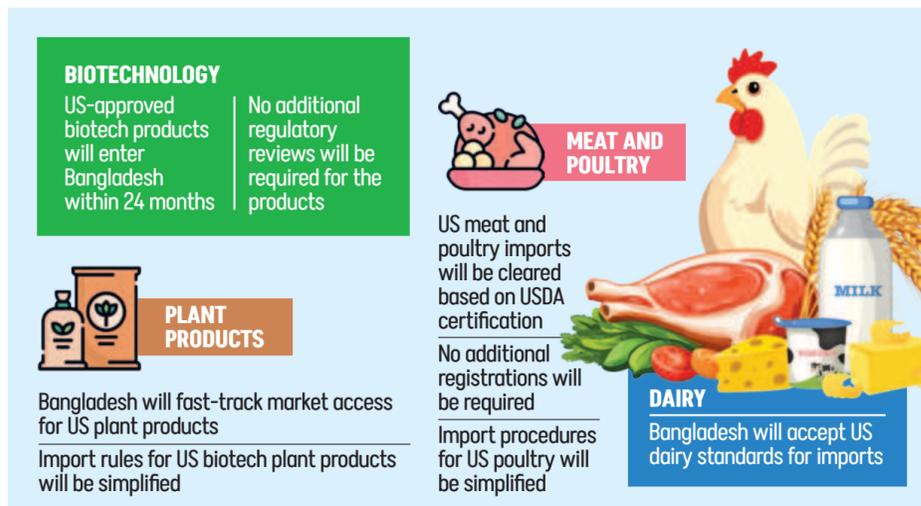
LOCAL FEARS

The agreement has provoked alarm among domestic producers.

US TRADE DEAL IN FOCUS

Mohammad Shah Emran, general secretary of the Bangladesh Dairy Farmers' Association, argued that the introduction of foreign products on a big scale "could undermine the growth of our domestic dairy sector, which is already struggling to remain competitive."

"We urge the government to provide necessary support, including incentives and infrastructure development, so that local dairy



farmers can improve production standards and compete effectively," he said.

Adviser Farida also warned of a potential influx of cheaper meat products that could disrupt local industries.

Not all industry figures are pessimistic. Tanvir Ahmed, managing director of Sheltech Group, which operates Bengal Meat, sees opportunity in American technology, particularly large breed cattle such as Brahma, that could improve yields.

"While we are in the early stages, there is a clear opportunity to

improve meat production through better breeding techniques and advanced farming practices," he said.

"With the right support, we can reduce our reliance on imports and strengthen our domestic meat production," he added.

Whether such support will materialise remains an open question.

Bapon Dey, a professor of poultry science at Bangladesh Agricultural University, said the trade agreement with the US offers significant opportunities for the poultry industry, but it also presents

considerable challenges.

Bangladesh must upgrade its poultry management systems, improve biosecurity and meet international standards. The lack of coordination between the government, the private sector and research institutions is a key barrier.

"If these gaps are bridged," he added, "Bangladesh's poultry sector can unlock the full potential of such an agreement."

BIOTECH WITHOUT BORDERS
Perhaps the most significant shift concerns agricultural biotechnology.

Bangladesh will recognise the effectiveness of America's regulatory system in ensuring the safety of agricultural biotechnology products. Within 24 months, it must frame a policy allowing the import and marketing of American agricultural biotech products legally approved in the US.

Bangladesh will not require any separate pre-market review, additional labelling or local approval.

Products that have completed American pre-market processes will face no additional scrutiny in Bangladesh.

The agreement clarifies that processed food and agricultural products derived from biotechnology, including those subjected to heat treatment or grinding, do not contain living modified organisms and are exempt from local authority approval.

In other words, Bangladesh is adopting American regulatory standards wholesale.

The absence of labelling requirements is particularly contentious.

Adviser Farida pointed out that biotechnology products such as soybeans and oil are already being imported without proper labels.

"The absence of genetically modified organisms' labels on these products raises concerns, as consumers are not fully informed about what they are consuming," she said. The demand for proper labelling would provide transparency and allow consumers to make informed decisions.



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BANGLADESH-US TRADE AGREEMENT IN FOCUS



Fahmida Khatun

A deal done in the dark – almost

CPD Executive Director Fahmida Khatun says pre-deal consultations with economists were largely formalities

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh's recently signed trade deal with the United States promises slight tariff relief but carries deeper implications for fiscal stability, foreign policy and democratic transparency, according to Fahmida Khatun, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

The economist says the agreement, signed on February 9 just days before a national election, was negotiated with limited public engagement.

The interim government did hold meetings with economists, civil society representatives and business leaders on ways to reduce bilateral trade deficit, but Fahmida, who attended one of the sessions, describes them as "just mere formalities."

In an interview with The Daily Star, she said that those discussions were limited in scope and substance. When economists began raising questions, there was little clarity about the topics under consideration.

Meanwhile, negotiations with US authorities continued under a non-disclosure agreement, with no public information available, she said.

"Overall, the process resembled a box-ticking exercise rather than a genuine national consultation," added the CPD executive director.

"The deal may help exporters in the short-term, but its financial costs, geopolitical conditions and policy limits could affect Bangladesh's economy for years."

She emphasised that the agreement is "not only an economic agreement but also geopolitical and security-related," which makes transparency essential.

For a pact that will shape trade, diplomacy and fiscal priorities for years, the lack of broader engagement has raised concerns about legitimacy and preparedness.

According to Fahmida, a far-reaching agreement covering tariffs, defence and energy purchases, technology use and geopolitical alignment has been signed without a strong public debate. Implementation will not fall on those who negotiated it but on the next elected government.

"The interim government will leave without responsibility, while the next government will bear both the positives and negatives," she observes.

SOME RELIEF

Under the deal, the reciprocal tariff on Bangladeshi exports to the United States, previously set at 20 percent, has been reduced to 19 percent. In the fiercely competitive ready-made garment sector, the difference matters as much psychologically as financially.

"Even though it is only a 1 percentage-point reduction, it still provides some relief," said the CPD executive director.

Competing exporters face broadly similar tariff levels. Vietnam continues to face around 20 percent, while India, which previously had the same rate, has recently secured a reduction to 18 percent, putting Bangladesh closer to its competitors.

The agreement also provides duty benefits in the US market for garments made with American cotton, though the advantage is limited.

"Bangladesh also exports to other countries, so this is only partially beneficial," she commented.

"It may help Bangladesh remain competitive in its largest export sector, but it does not fundamentally alter the structure of trade."

THE HIDDEN COST: FISCAL STRAIN

For the next government, the larger economic effects lie in financial obligations. The deal includes commitments to purchase US goods, notably Boeing aircraft, and to expand cooperation in agriculture and energy.

The agreement enforces a form of managed trade with specific targets. Bangladesh has committed to purchasing \$15 billion worth of US energy commodities, including liquefied natural gas (LNG), over 15 years.

LNG may conflict with Bangladesh's long-term energy goals. "Bangladesh aims to increase renewable energy, but LNG is expensive and not clean," Fahmida said.

"Ideally, the country should gradually reduce LNG dependence and invest in domestic energy exploration. Instead, the agreement may lock Bangladesh into costly

energy imports."

In agriculture, Dhaka will import at least \$3.5 billion of US farm products, including wheat and soybeans.

Bangladesh is already coping with rising domestic and external debt. "The fiscal space of the government is very narrow. We have relatively high debt, and repayment has already started," said the economist.

The CPD executive director said that funding the purchases of 14 aircraft will require "proactive efforts" and could further strain debt sustainability. The country's debt-to-GDP ratio rose to 38.61 percent in the first quarter of this fiscal year from 36.30 percent a year earlier, reflecting sustained borrowing amid tightening fiscal space.

Though framed as a trade deal, Fahmida said the agreement carries clear geopolitical overtones. Certain clauses limit Bangladesh's engagement with "non-market countries," widely interpreted to include China and Russia.

The deal may help exporters in the short-term, but its financial costs, geopolitical conditions and policy limits could affect Bangladesh's economy for years

"There are clauses binding Bangladesh not to engage in certain dealings with so-called 'non-market countries,'" Fahmida said. "This clearly introduces a geopolitical and security dimension."

For a country that has traditionally balanced relations among major powers, this could complicate foreign policy.

"Bangladesh's foreign policy is to maintain a balanced relationship with its partners. How the government will implement this while maintaining balance is going to be another challenge," she said.

POLITICS AND TIMING

The timing of the agreement has amplified controversy. Signed three days before a national election, it was

concluded by an interim administration that will not oversee its implementation.

Fahmida believes the timing of the agreement is crucial. "This is a major national decision. Ideally, the elected government should have taken this decision."

"The urgency is difficult to explain. Negotiations had been ongoing for months, and while exporters, particularly garment manufacturers, probably benefited from clarity on tariffs, broader national interests suffered."

She said, "Closing the deal may have been necessary for exporters, but not necessarily for all sectors. The deal could have waited."

The next government will inherit the consequences of a deal it did not negotiate. Renegotiation may be difficult. "Once an agreement is signed, flexibility is limited," Fahmida said.

The agreement intersects with wider structural changes. Bangladesh is preparing to graduate from least developed country status in November, a shift that will reduce preferential market access and concessional financing.

According to her, to sustain growth, Bangladesh must diversify trade partnerships, improve governance and strengthen institutions. The competitive landscape is also shifting.

India has secured more favourable trade terms with major partners, including the European Union. "Bangladesh must remain mindful of competition," she warned.

In the longer term, she suggested exploring a full free-trade agreement with the United States, though such negotiations would be complex and constrained. "Trade agreements must be a win-win situation," she said. Given Bangladesh's limitations in technology and finance, the benefits must be carefully assessed.

"How this trade deal will benefit Bangladesh, something we have to see," she said. "The next government will have to examine it very closely and, if possible, renegotiate aspects of it."

Unequal, rushed and risky

Prof Selim Raihan says it raises questions about Bangladesh's economic sovereignty and place in the global order



Selim Raihan

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

A trade agreement signed between Bangladesh and the United States on February 9, just days before a national election, has drawn sharp criticism from economists and policy observers.

The Agreement on Reciprocal Trade, signed by the interim government at the end of its tenure, offers only a marginal reduction in US tariffs but binds Bangladesh to a broad framework covering defence, energy, trade, labour and digital governance.

"The agreement could reshape Bangladesh's economic autonomy, geopolitical balance and long-term development path," said Professor Selim Raihan, executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (Sanem).

Speaking in an extended interview, Raihan described the deal as "highly unequal," "rushed" and "potentially damaging" to Bangladesh's strategic independence.

His first concern centres on timing. The agreement was finalised by an interim government just days before the election, a move he believes sets a "troubling precedent".

"I do not understand why our interim government rushed to sign this agreement just days before the election," he said. "This should have been left to the newly elected government... Waiting one or two months would not have created major problems."

Raihan contrasted Bangladesh's decision with India's slower approach to a similar trade arrangement with Washington.

"I was informed that India and the United States have not yet signed their trade agreement... If a country like India has not finalised such a deal, why were we in such a hurry?" he asked.

He said an agreement of this magnitude should have gone through parliamentary scrutiny and wider consultation with business leaders and trade experts. "Stakeholders, including exporters and experts, were not properly consulted," he said, calling the process "deeply concerning".

One of Raihan's strongest criticisms concerns the imbalance of obligations between the two countries.

In the 32-page document, "Bangladesh shall" appears 158 times, while "the United States shall" appears only nine times, he said. "This shows that most obligations fall on Bangladesh."

Under the agreement, Dhaka will open its market to

around 6,700 US products, including chemicals, medical devices, machinery, ICT equipment, motor vehicles, beef and poultry. In contrast, the US will grant duty-free or preferential access to about 2,500 Bangladeshi items.

In return, Washington has reduced its reciprocal tariff on Bangladeshi exports to 19 percent from 20 percent.

For Raihan, the imbalance is especially troubling given the asymmetry between the two economies. "For a trade agreement between the most powerful country in the world and one of the weakest economies among the least developed countries, this is highly unequal," he said.

"Here the weaker country is offering more, while the superpower is offering less," he added. "Bangladesh is actually giving special and differential treatment to the United States."

Apart from trade, Raihan expressed concern over provisions that could limit Bangladesh's policy autonomy.

The agreement should have been left to the newly elected government. Waiting one or two months would not have created major problems

The agreement mandates that Bangladesh endeavour to increase purchases of US military equipment and restricts procurement from certain countries – language widely seen as aimed at China. It also allows Washington to terminate the deal if Bangladesh enters trade agreements with countries classified as non-market economies.

"In many areas, including defence purchases and trade agreements with other countries, Bangladesh may need endorsement from US authorities," Raihan said. "This raises concerns about Bangladesh's independence and sovereign decision-making."

The deal emphasises "economic and national security alignment" between the two countries, which Raihan describes as "potentially intrusive".

"This is not just about trade. It is geopolitics," he said. "Bangladesh is vulnerable in global geopolitical competition, and we must be careful."

RISK OF LOSING NON-ALIGNED STATUS

Raihan said the agreement could push Bangladesh towards alignment with US strategic interests.

Under one provision, if the US introduces border

measures or trade actions on national security grounds, Bangladesh would be required to adopt complementary restrictive measures. Critics say this could bind Dhaka to US sanctions and trade disputes.

"If the United States bans products from certain countries, Bangladesh may be expected to support that," Raihan said. "Bangladesh has historically remained non-aligned. This agreement could change that stance."

He also highlighted the challenge of managing relations with China, Bangladesh's largest import partner, and India, its key regional neighbour.

"China is our largest import source, yet the US has trade conflicts with China. If Bangladesh is pressured to reduce imports from China, it will be extremely difficult," he said. "We need good relations with everyone – China, India, the US, and others."

ZERO TARIFF, BUT NOT REALLY

Raihan criticised what he described as misleading public communication about tariff benefits. "When officials spoke of 'zero tariff' for products using US cotton, it actually refers to zero reciprocal tariff, not total tariff removal," he said. "The original tariff remains."

Many exporters misunderstood the provision, believing it meant full tariff elimination. "The document clearly states the original MFN [Most-Favoured-Nation] tariff remains," Raihan added.

Although Bangladesh will notify the World Trade Organization (WTO) of its commitments, Raihan argues that several provisions contradict WTO norms.

"Under WTO principles, weaker economies usually receive special and differential treatment," he said. "But here Bangladesh appears to offer greater concessions."

He called this a "serious contradiction" and questioned whether adequate WTO expertise was involved in the negotiations.

Another concern is what Raihan describes as "managed trade", where Bangladesh commits to importing fixed quantities of US goods regardless of market conditions.

The agreement requires Bangladesh to purchase US liquefied natural gas worth about \$15 billion over 15 years and increase imports of aircraft and agricultural products.

This includes plans for Biman Bangladesh Airlines to buy 14 Boeing aircraft and at least \$3.5 billion of US agricultural goods such as wheat, soybean and cotton.

"The whole idea is to reduce the bilateral trade deficit," Raihan said. "You have to import more from the United

States, regardless of competitive prices."

He warned that Bangladesh could be forced to buy more expensive goods even when cheaper alternatives are available.

"If we find a cheaper source elsewhere, we may not be able to choose it," he said. "This will put additional pressure on our foreign exchange."

"How are we going to finance aircraft purchases and energy imports? There is a risk of increased reliance on foreign loans," Raihan said.

The agreement also requires changes to Bangladesh's labour laws, including expanding union rights and bringing export processing zones under national labour standards within two years. Analysts say this could unsettle investors in the garment sector.

"Labour is a very critical issue in Bangladesh," Raihan said. "If these new provisions create confusion or discomfort among investors, it could create serious problems."

He also raised concerns about provisions requiring Bangladesh to recognise US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approvals for pharmaceuticals and medical devices, which could weaken regulatory sovereignty.

REMOVAL OF NON-TARIFF BARRIERS: ONE POSITIVE AREA

Despite his criticism, Raihan acknowledged some potential benefits.

"There is a positive area in addressing non-tariff barriers," he said. "But reforms should apply globally, not just for one country."

He said inefficient regulations raise costs for both domestic and foreign businesses, and reform could support broader economic growth.

Raihan believes the agreement will pose a major challenge for the next government. "The next government will already be occupied with domestic political and economic challenges," he said. "They may seek a review rather than cancellation."

Cancelling the deal could damage Bangladesh's credibility. "Signing and cancelling later does not send a positive signal to trading partners," he said.

At the same time, moving ahead would lock in long-term obligations. "The pressure will remain – financial, strategic, and geopolitical," Raihan said.

"We need everyone – China, India, the United States, and others," he said. "Maintaining that balance is crucial for Bangladesh's future."

Tax-GDP ratio: Parties promise the moon



MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

After many years, Bangladesh's 13th Parliamentary Election has injected a rare festive mood into public life. Political parties have unveiled their manifestos with unusual care, and voters appear genuinely engaged, scrutinising promises rather than merely consuming slogans.

Among the lofty pledges on social spending, one commitment stands out for both its ambition and ubiquity: raising the tax-to-GDP ratio.

Almost every major party has set a numerical target, ranging from 12 percent to 15 percent. This is no small feat in a country whose tax effort has long been one of its gravest structural weaknesses.

LOFTY PLEDGES

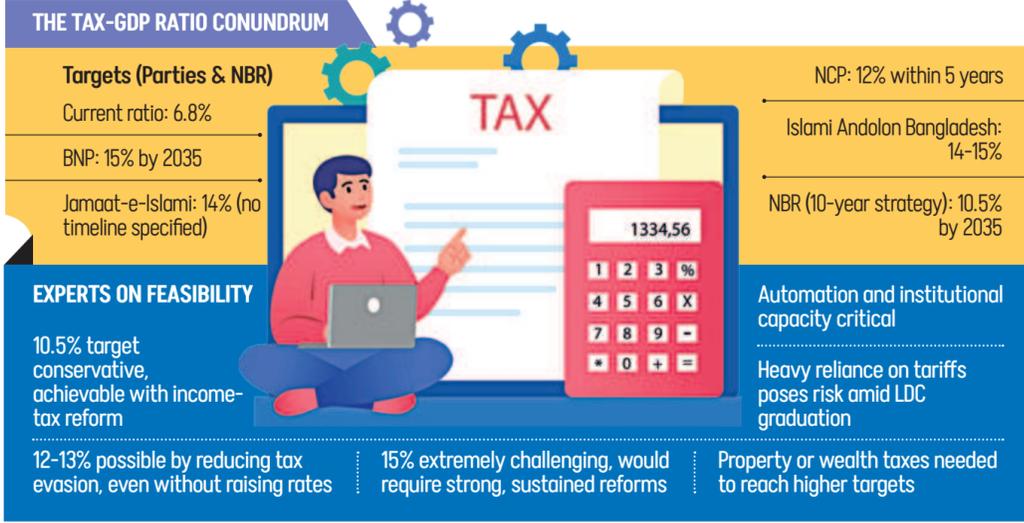
At 6.8 percent, Bangladesh's tax-to-GDP ratio ranks among the world's lowest, well below that of peer economies.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) pledges to raise it to 15 percent by 2035; Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami proposes 14 percent, without specifying a timeline; the National Citizen Party (NCP) commits to 12 percent within five years; and Islami Andolon Bangladesh sets a target range of 14-15 percent.

These pronouncements arrive just as the National Board of Revenue (NBR) has formulated its own ten-year strategy, aiming for 10.5 percent by fiscal year 2034-35 under its new 10-year plan integrated into the Medium- and Long-Term Revenue strategy.

The plan seeks to bolster domestic resource mobilisation, strengthen fiscal foundations and support sustainable growth, while also preparing Bangladesh for graduation from the list of least-developed countries (LDCs) and helping meet its Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

The revenue board's strategy comes amid pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), reflecting conditions attached to the multilateral lender's ongoing \$4.7 billion loan programme.



NEEDS "SERIOUS WORK"

According to Md Deen Islam, research director at Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID), the NBR's 10.5 percent target is "actually quite conservative."

"Even without raising tax or VAT rates, simply controlling tax evasion could push the tax-to-GDP ratio to 12-13 percent," he argues.

Achieving 15 percent or more within the next decade, however, would be extremely challenging without strong and sustained commitment to reform.

"What political parties are saying is technically possible," Islam observes, "but it would require serious work."

The key, according to him, lies in strengthening the NBR's capacity, particularly through accelerated automation.

"Going beyond 10.5 percent is achievable," he says, "but reaching 15 percent will prove difficult without introducing property or wealth taxes."

The RAPID research director noted that while the tax base is expanding, many individuals still file zero-income returns.

A property tax, stronger enforcement and automation could boost revenue and

curb evasion, though VAT will remain constrained by the informal sector, he opines.

Islam points out another challenge. Nearly 30 percent of Bangladesh's revenue still derives from tariffs, which are set to decline owing to recent trade concessions and tariff rationalisation following LDC graduation. "Without sincere income tax reform," he warns, "even achieving the 10.5 percent target will be difficult."

ABUREAUCRATIC MUDDLE

The recent bifurcation of the NBR has become mired in bureaucratic wrangles, as the interim government failed to complete the process during its tenure.

This lack of completion has created frustration among revenue officials, who argue that delays and administrative hurdles are hampering efficiency and disrupting reform efforts.

Many fear that prolonged uncertainty may slow policy execution, weaken institutional capacity and undermine improvements in revenue collection.

Towfiqul Islam Khan, additional research director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), argues that the NBR's reforms were largely instrumental, driven by IMF conditionalities.

"Political parties had no involvement in the process," he notes. "They now have their own ambitions and will act accordingly. But the interim government pushed the entire economic reform agenda without engaging political actors, and this is not an isolated case."

Khan adds that the interim government took major economic reform decisions while completely ignoring political parties. "As a result, the fate of these reform targets is now in question. Either the reform commission's reports and the efforts undertaken so far will lose relevance, or the political commitments being made will prove futile," he fears.

Even in terms of implementation, it remains unclear whether the existing NBR structure can absorb or sustain these reforms, he warns.

Stating that there has also been significant wastage of taxpayers' money in producing reform documents, Khan notes that the unfortunate reality is that no one from the interim government will remain to answer for it.

"If the reform agenda now has to be reworked to align with the priorities of the winning political party, there will be no accountability for the public money already spent," he says.

US TRADE DEAL Mandatory 50% reinsurance with SBC to be dropped

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh has agreed to abolish the requirement for non-life insurers to reinsure at least 50 percent of their business with the state-owned Sadharan Bima Corporation (SBC), under the newly signed US-Bangladesh agreement on reciprocal trade.

Simply put, reinsurance is "insurance for insurance companies." It allows insurance companies to share risks so they can pay large claims, such as factory fires or cargo losses.

Under the current law, at least half of such reinsurance must go to SBC, while the rest is handled by local or foreign companies.

In November last year, the Financial Institutions Division (FID) proposed removing a clause in the Insurance Corporation Act 2019 that requires non-life insurers to hand over half their reinsurance business to the lone state-owned insurer and reinsurer SBC.

The step was taken in line with the demand from the US as part of the conditions to cut reciprocal tariffs on Bangladesh's exports to the American market.

Washington initially threatened to slap a 37 percent tariff on products shipped to its market from Bangladesh. It later reduced the rate to 20 percent which came into effect from August.



In the deal signed on February 9, the rate was reduced to 19 percent from 20 percent.

At that time, FID officials were reluctant to disclose the reason behind the move, but a top official admitted this yesterday.

Private insurers earlier welcomed the move, with some saying they were frustrated by SBC's backlog of unsettled reinsurance claims, some dating back to 2020, which has delayed compensation for clients.

Just a few days later, SBC sent a letter to FID, expressing concerns over the removal of the mandatory reinsurance clause.

The state agency reported Tk 297.6 crore in net income after tax in the financial year ending in December 2024, up 13 percent from Tk 262.5 crore a year ago.

However, its total comprehensive income stood at a negative for the year when it took into account the unrealised losses on shares of Tk 862 crore. Its earnings per share slipped 37 percent to Tk 33.07 in 2024 from Tk 52.51 a year ago, according to Sadharan Bima's audited financial statements.

BRAC Bank opens relocated Motijheel branch

STAR BUSINESS DESK

BRAC Bank PLC has opened a relocated Motijheel branch to offer enhanced services and an improved banking experience to customers.

Located in the heart of the country's commercial and financial hub, the new branch features a spacious premium banking lounge, locker facilities and dedicated customer relationship management (CRM) services, ensuring greater convenience and comfort for clients.

Tareq Refat Ullah Khan, managing director and CEO of BRAC Bank PLC, inaugurated the branch at Rupayan Red Crescent Tower in Motijheel, Dhaka recently, according to a press release.

Sheikh Mohammad Ashfaque, deputy managing director and head of branch distribution network, attended the inauguration ceremony.

With 310 branches and sub-



Tareq Refat Ullah Khan, managing director and CEO of BRAC Bank PLC, inaugurates the relocated branch at Rupayan Red Crescent Tower in Motijheel, Dhaka recently.

PHOTO: BRAC BANK

branches across the country, BRAC Bank has one of the largest banking networks in Bangladesh.

Taher Hasan Al Mamun, senior zonal head for the South zone, and

AKM Tareq, senior zonal head for the North zone, along with other senior officials of the branch distribution network, were also present at the event.

ONE Bank opens CRM booth at Gulshan branch

STAR BUSINESS DESK

ONE Bank PLC has recently launched a new CRM booth at its Gulshan Islamic Banking Branch on Gulshan Avenue in Dhaka, reinforcing the bank's commitment to delivering convenient, modern and secure banking solutions for customers.

The CRM, or customer relationship management system, is designed specifically for the banking sector to manage customer data and interactions more efficiently, helping improve service quality and customer retention.

Anannya Das Gupta, director of ONE Bank PLC, inaugurated the CRM booth as the chief guest, according to a press release.

The launch underscores ONE Bank's ongoing strategy to modernise its service touchpoints, enhance customer experience and strengthen its brand presence across the country.



Anannya Das Gupta, a director of ONE Bank PLC, inaugurates the CRM booth at the bank's Gulshan Islamic banking branch on Gulshan Avenue in Dhaka recently.

PHOTO: ONE BANK

IFIC Bank, Swisscontact to develop export-oriented vegetable sector

STAR BUSINESS DESK

IFIC Bank PLC has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Switzerland-based international organisation Swisscontact for a project aimed at elevating the international standards of Bangladesh's export-oriented vegetable sector and strengthening safe food export capabilities.

Syed Mansur Mustafa, managing director of IFIC Bank PLC, and Helal Hussain, country director of Swisscontact Bangladesh, signed the MoU at IFIC Tower in Dhaka recently, according to a press release.

As the lead financial partner, IFIC Bank will use the project to expand sustainable financing in the agriculture and SME sectors, support export-oriented entrepreneurs, and develop risk-mitigated loan portfolios.

The initiative will also facilitate field-testing and innovation of the

bank's agriculture, SME, and green finance products.

The project is scheduled for a 27-month period, from January 2026 to March 2028.

Under the programme, 1,000 smallholder farmers across the country will receive training on Good Agricultural Practices (GAP),

climate-resilient farming, safe pesticide use, residue control, and advanced post-harvest management.

Cluster based production systems will also be established to ensure traceability, with at least 30 percent female participation in the programme.



Helal Hussain, country director of Swisscontact Bangladesh, and Syed Mansur Mustafa, managing director of IFIC Bank PLC, pose for a group photograph after signing the memorandum of understanding at IFIC Tower in Dhaka recently.

PHOTO: IFIC BANK

NCC Bank supports 'SeaSafe Lifeguard' initiative in Cox's Bazar

STAR BUSINESS DESK

NCC Bank PLC has extended support to the "SeaSafe Lifeguard" programme run by the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB) at sea beach to help reduce drowning risks and raise public awareness.

M Shamsul Arefin, managing director of NCC Bank, inaugurated the programme at Sea Pearl Beach Resort in Cox's Bazar recently, according to a press release.

Speaking at the event, Arefin said drowning remains a silent but devastating crisis in Bangladesh, leaving a profound impact on affected families.

He said the bank's support for the initiative reflects its commitment to public safety and social well-being. Drowning claims nearly 18,000 lives annually in Bangladesh, many of them children, making it a major public health concern.

Since 2012, CIPRB has been implementing the SeaSafe Lifeguard programme through regular beach patrols, rescue operations and

awareness campaigns in Cox's Bazar.

The initiative has saved 1,052 lives so far and reached millions of people through drowning prevention efforts.

NCC Bank said its involvement is part of its corporate social responsibility activities aimed at promoting public safety and social welfare.

M Khurshed Alam, additional managing director of NCC Bank; Md Zakir Anam, Mohammed Mizanur Rahman and Md Habibur Rahman, deputy managing directors; and Nighat Mumtaz, executive vice-president and head of sustainable and women's banking as well as head of strategic brand management, attended the event.



M Shamsul Arefin, managing director of NCC Bank PLC, inaugurates the "SeaSafe Lifeguard" programme, run by the Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh, at Sea Pearl Beach Resort in Cox's Bazar recently.

PHOTO: NCC BANK

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Ensure free, fair, and peaceful voting

EC, law enforcers, and political parties must deliver this together

Today, the nation is voting in one of the most anticipated and consequential elections of Bangladesh's history. From 7:30 am to 4:30 pm, citizens will cast their ballots to decide the country's future, not just for the next five years but perhaps for many years to come. They will determine not only the next government but also the fate of the constitution through a referendum. Never before have Bangladeshis cast two such crucial ballots on the same day; however, this is not the only factor making today's election special. This poll comes after a bloody uprising that ousted Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian government through the sacrifices of thousands in 2024. Since then, people have been eagerly awaiting this poll so as to return to the democratic process. This aspiration is primarily dependent on all parties accepting the verdict unreservedly.

The majority of voters believe that, unlike the last three elections, their ballots this time will reflect their choice. Undoubtedly, this poll is more participatory than the previous three held under the Awami League government. Regardless of whom voters supported, the results of the polls were largely predetermined. For example, in the January 2024 election, voting choices were limited to Awami League, its allies, and its dummy candidates. Ironically, AL is absent from the polls this year, and for justifiable reasons. Another factor that makes today's voting special is the composition of young voters. Aged 18 to 37, they form 44 percent of the 12.77 crore voters and will be a decisive factor in the results. Nevertheless, the excitement to vote is evident across all age groups. Since Tuesday, many have been heading home to cast their ballots. Bus and train stations, as well as launch terminals, have been flooded with people, similar to the rush seen during Eid holidays.

The overall festive atmosphere has not been disrupted by large-scale violence compared to previous elections, though it hasn't been completely violence-free. According to the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS), pre-election violence during the 12th national polls—from the schedule announcement date to the eve of election day—claimed seven lives and left 1,681 people injured in at least 379 incidents, whereas five people died and 603 were injured in pre-election violence between the 13th election's schedule announcement date and February 9 (two days before the election), as per police headquarters data. Security has been beefed up across polling centres, and the visible presence of law enforcers on the streets provides assurance of a safe voting environment.

After 18 long years, people are vying for a free and fair election, one the interim government had promised when it took office on August 8, 2024. We hope the government will follow through on this particular pledge, although it faltered on many others during its 18-month tenure. It must ensure the integrity of the process as domestic and international observers, the media, and the wider world watch on. Political parties and their supporters must also aid this process by exercising restraint to protect ballots and ensure peaceful voting. And they must respect the people's will, accept the result gracefully, and allow for a peaceful transition, as is the norm in mature democracies. Let today's election be the turning point that transforms Bangladesh for the better.

Partial transparency not enough

Advisers' asset disclosure must be comprehensive and consistent

We welcome the publication of wealth statements by the advisers of the outgoing interim government in line with their earlier commitment. According to the published information, all current advisers have assets exceeding Tk 1 crore; the assets of 18 advisers increased, while those of three declined. The commerce adviser holds the most assets at Tk 91.65 crore, while the chief adviser's assets stand at Tk 15.62 crore, marking an increase of Tk 1.61 crore over one year. While these disclosures are significant, their coverage still raises important questions.

The advisers' wealth statements cover the period from July 2024 to June 2025. But the statements for the last seven months—from July 2025 to January 2026—are missing. The status of their assets during this period—how much cash they hold and what types of investments they possess—should also be made public.

Moreover, the statements provide only total net assets—movable and immovable—but do not include detailed breakdowns such as landholdings, flats, bank deposits, or cash in hand. By contrast, parliamentary candidates are required to submit far more detailed affidavits. There is no reason why the wealth statements of appointed state officials should not be detailed as well.

Transparency must also extend beyond the advisers themselves. The wealth statements of those appointed as special assistants to the chief adviser—many of whom had significant influence over key government decisions—should also be made available without delay. Similarly, during its tenure, the interim government appointed many civil servants to key positions on a contractual basis. What has become of their wealth statements? The government directed all civil servants to submit asset declarations, and it has repeatedly claimed that they have complied. Yet, these statements have not been made public.

Arrangements should therefore be made to ensure that the wealth statements of all officials holding key government positions and senior offices are disclosed. While the eventual publication of these statements is significant, a proactive and timely release would have set a stronger precedent. We hope that, from now on, those occupying important positions in government, whether in a ministerial capacity or in senior civil service roles, will publish their wealth statements annually. Only through consistent and comprehensive disclosure can accountability be truly strengthened.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Abraham Lincoln born

On this day in 1809, US President Abraham Lincoln was born in Hardin County, Kentucky, later leading the nation through the American civil war and ending slavery.

Why this election matters more than ever



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

Despite many uncertainties and deep misgivings that weigh heavily on our minds, the excitement of voting this time is inescapable. It is an election unlike any other, and definitely not like the one-sided, engineered elections we witnessed in 2014, 2018, and 2024 where "victory" was as predictable as the possibility of nighttime following dusk. This time, there is real competition, with expectations that it will be fair and free, that the power is with the voters.

In this election, we are witnessing the return of Jamaat-e-Islami, a party that has gained significant support of late, despite its stigma of 1971. The emergence of the National Citizen Party (NCP), a new political party born out of the July uprising and now aligned with Jamaat, adds further complexity. And then there's the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), long repressed but now emerging with the legacy of two beloved leaders. Led by their son, returning after 17 years of being forced to stay abroad, BNP appears poised to make a serious run. The total absence of Awami League (AL) in the election is another factor that makes it so different.

The results of this election will reveal whether people's July aspirations are aligned towards the religious right or the pragmatic centre. With a large number of swing voters—women, young voters, and traditional AL voters—the outcome is not as clearly predictable.

The January 2024 election seemed to be the last nail in the coffin of our democracy, and of course many of us didn't even bother to vote. Then July happened, and we watched in disbelief and awe how scores of unarmed students, like their predecessors many decades before, led the stand against a ruthless regime.

It was the women in the university residential halls who took the first step—to defy a dictator who lost all connection with her people and chose to use fear, repression, and the flourishing of avarice to stay in power. Again, it was the female students who got mercilessly beaten by the Chhatra League goons, igniting the first spark that transformed a seemingly simple anti-quota, anti-discrimination

movement into something much more consequential. And when Abu Sayeed stood, arms outstretched, his face frozen with disbelief, as bullets pierced his chest, making him the first martyr, the movement gained tremendous momentum as thousands marched the streets in anger and grief, the students leading and the people following. We watched in awe as the protesters, most of them young people, put forward their bodies in defiance, their courage catalysed by Abu Sayeed's spirit. We watched in horror as the bullets kept coming, first from the police on the ground, then from helicopters, a



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

killing spree that took around 1,400 and maimed thousands.

Then, on August 5, 2024, the impossible happened. The repressive ruler fled, and the country was free of her brutal regime. The celebrations of people from all walks of life were spontaneous, unadulterated, unanimous. Finally, there was hope. We dared to dream again.

When Prof Muhammad Yunus answered the call of the students and an unconventional cabinet of civil society members and student representatives was sworn in to form the interim government, there were expectations that our prayers had been answered and real change was coming. The shackles that bound us seemed to be breaking. Victims of enforced disappearances were freed, and political prisoners long held captive by the previous regime were released.

But all too soon, chaos returned

as streets became a battleground of protests, each one demanding an immediate solution. All too often, the government, struggling to put out the fires, was forced to cave in. We were understanding of their predicament. We decided to be patient.

But fear, that insidious emotion that can cripple and corrode even the bravest among us, returned all too quickly. The need for justice for all the July killings and shootings predominated everything else. However, the justice process became diverted, selective, biased, and determined by the ones with the loudest voices and the biggest mobs. "Mobocracy" ruled everything—from arbitrary cancellations (and appointments with the current political colours) of posts at universities, schools, media houses, and the bureaucracy, to deciding who deserved to be beaten or burnt to death for "being a fascist sympathiser," "hurting religious sentiment," or being suspected of "theft." The state, apart from often languid statements

allowed to escape after months of hiding.

Women, who played a pivotal role during the movement, started to become invisible in politics but remained visible for being targeted by abusers, both online and offline. Certain political groups had the audacity to publicly hurl abuses at women's groups—even the Women's

The results of this election will reveal whether people's July aspirations are aligned towards the religious right or the pragmatic centre. With a large number of swing voters—women, young voters, and traditional AL voters—the outcome is not as clearly predictable.

Affairs Reform Commission's members—for recommending equal rights, weaponising religion to justify their misogynistic words. In fact, never before have religious groups become so obsessive about women: their movement, their attire, and their "place" in society. Major political parties even failed to field a bare minimum of female candidates. Only 83 out of the 2,028 candidates are women.

The interim government, despite its promise of major reforms, became subsumed by perpetual street protests, the push-and-pull of political parties and student groups, and endless discussions with political parties on the much-heralded July National Charter, which vows to bring about real change in our future and will likely be endorsed through a referendum today. Over the last 18 months, there have been some significant gains: in banking discipline, an end to looting of banks, stabilising foreign exchange reserves, and ordinances to ensure labour rights and create an independent judiciary, to name a few. But the disappointments have been crushing too. Women, minority, and Indigenous communities, the jobless, the poor—these groups have felt left in the lurch.

This election, therefore, is not just another political contest. It is the culmination of all our hopes and all our disillusionments. It represents the final card we can play if we are to secure a future that reflects the aspirations we so desperately sought during the July uprising.

We cannot afford to fail.

Not voting is not an option



Monorom Polok is a member of the Editorial team at The Daily Star.

MONOROM POLOK

For those of us in our 20s and above, the 13th parliamentary election is the first where we hold real leverage, or at least much better leverage than people did in the last three elections. That's why this election is rightly being referred to as Gen Z-inspired.

In the last three elections, votes were cast but that rarely translated into meaningful change in how the country was governed. We also had no real say in the formation of the interim government in terms of who was selected as an adviser, or how the government has since operated. Many had also hoped for an election to take place immediately after the July 2024 uprising, but that decision was left to be finalised by the interim government without any input from citizens.

However, this election, we have the opportunity to exercise our democratic power that was missing for more than 15 years, which was reclaimed through protests, bloodshed, and sacrifices by thousands. This means we finally have the chance to effectively shape the broader direction of the country.

Despite this reality, many are still contemplating opting out of voting altogether. This sentiment largely

stems from their disappointment with the two dominant players in this election: BNP and Jamaat. But this argument for abstaining fails to consider the consequences of silence.

The BNP carries a history of corruption and extortion allegations. Worse, these practices from within the party re-emerged after the July uprising, with a report by the Transparency International Bangladesh linking 91.7 percent of political violence between August 2024 and December 2025 to the BNP. So, those who are frustrated by everyday corruption and the normalisation of extortion have reason to question whether such practices will intensify under a BNP government.

Jamaat, on the other hand, stood on the wrong side of history during the Liberation War. It opposed the formation of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, the very state we inhabit today and the leadership of which Jamaat is vying for in this election. Then there is the concern of the party or party-aligned groups imposing religious morality upon citizens. Jamaat's stance on women's rights is another concern. Referring to men

as the "managers" of women runs counter to the equal legal rights for all as enshrined in our constitution. The Jamaat ameer's past "criticism" of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission's recommendation to recognise marital rape is also hard to forget.

If you are someone who believes that the promises of "zero corruption" are enough to outweigh potential

Many are also concerned about vote-rigging. Although there has not yet been any direct indication of this practice recurring, we must recognise that the very system that enabled vote manipulation still exists. Showing up at the voting booth can prevent this ill as every vote uncast might create an opportunity for manipulation.

regressions in the rights of half of the population, that calculation deserves serious reconsideration. Oppression is rarely announced loudly; it takes root quietly and usually over many years. Each time we justify the injustice someone faces on the basis of not being directly affected by it ourselves, we ensure that, sooner or later, injustice comes for us as well. Even claims of incorruptibility must be scrutinised.

One must remember that no political entity is beyond accountability simply because it promises moral purity.

It is clear that both parties carry flaws, but this dilemma does not absolve one of their civic responsibility. If one believes that both options are flawed—even "evil"—the task is to make an informed choice for who represents the lesser harm, if not at the national level, then in their own constituency.

Many are also concerned about vote-rigging. Although there has not yet been any direct indication of this practice recurring, we must recognise that the very system that enabled vote manipulation still exists. Showing up at the voting booth can prevent this ill as every vote uncast might create an opportunity for manipulation.

The country's future will be shaped, at least in part, by the choices we make, or refuse to make. Many argue that with the contest effectively reduced to BNP vs Jamaat, and with the absence of the Awami League, there is no real option at all. That both are problematic in different ways. But flawed is not the same as identical. BNP and Jamaat are neither interchangeable in every respect, nor will they govern in the same way. They will also not shape institutions, rights, and public life in identical terms.

Each voter must ask themselves: how do I want to live? What kind of country do I want my friends, my family, and my peers to inhabit? Democracy does not promise purity. What it offers is choice. And abstaining is also a choice, often the most consequential one of all.

Bangladesh needs true leaders, not divisive or power-hungry 'netas'



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ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

Prior to the 13th parliamentary election that takes place on Thursday, Bangladesh saw quite an intense season of political campaigns heading into the deadline of February 10 morning. Both the candidates from major political parties and the independents held rallies, made promises, and sought voter support. Political parties offered a broad menu of pledges, including sweeping job creation targets, cash support for families or interest-free loans for the jobless, and an end to corruption, extortion, and discrimination. However, there was hardly any clear roadmap on how those pledges would be fulfilled, what processes they would be carried out through, or how institutional capacity would be strengthened to deliver them. Instead, throughout the campaign period, political speeches and posturing frequently delved into the kind of toxicity that we thought we had left behind.

The July uprising briefly raised hopes that politics in Bangladesh might take a new direction—one focused on restraint, accountability, and shared national interests. Yet, instead of a fresh political culture, citizens increasingly witnessed a return to old habits. This was visible not only among traditional parties but also among some new political forces. Their campaigns often centred around revisiting or rather reigniting old, unresolved historical or political issues. Sharp accusations and recycled narratives followed. This kind of environment leaves

little room for serious discussion about the future and keeps the political environment deeply divided.

This failure is particularly alarming at a time when the country faces a long list of serious social and economic challenges. Poverty, unemployment and underemployment remain high, especially among young people. Inflation has strained household budgets, while investment and economic growth has slowed. Inequality is widening, education standards are declining, healthcare services remain uneven and underfunded, and environmental damage is becoming increasingly visible. Yet, much of the campaign energy has been spent attacking opponents rather than presenting credible and practical plans to address both short-term and long-term needs of the country.

Election after election, parties fall back on the same strategies of mobilising fear, blaming rivals, and stirring emotions. The country has never truly developed a strong tradition of issue-based politics, where ideas, evidence, and long-term planning take centre stage.

Experts have linked the use of abusive language to rising tensions on the ground. According to an estimate by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) based on media reports, some 58 incidents of political violence were recorded between February 1 and 10, leaving two people dead and 489 others injured. During this time, at least 47 journalists faced attacks around the country. By comparison, 49 incidents were reported during the last

of issue-based politics, where ideas, evidence, and long-term planning take centre stage. Issue-based politics remains weak because it is inconvenient for those who thrive on chaos and confusion. Serious policy discussion demands accountability, and accountability threatens entrenched interests.

At the heart of this disappointment lies a leadership crisis. Bangladesh has never lacked "netas," but it has consistently lacked

perceived as someone focused mainly on holding power, winning elections, and securing personal advantage. Their speeches are filled with insults, and their campaigns driven by labels such as "pro-Indian," "pro-Pakistan," "anti-Islam," "anti-Bangladesh," "anti-liberation," or "foreign-backed." These accusations are thrown around carelessly, with little concern for truth or consequence. Ordinary citizens are tired of this politics of suspicion and division.

Political statements are a normal part of politics. However, words must be chosen carefully especially when dealing with sensitive issues rooted in history, identity, and tradition. In politics, a statement can act like ammunition. What is said, how it is said, and where it is said all may carry serious consequences. While political parties may believe that labelling opponents helps win votes, they often fail to realise that such language not only divides citizens but also sends damaging signals to the world, undermining Bangladesh's credibility as a responsible democratic state.

Such divisive politics has long fractured our society into camps defined by loyalty rather than principles. It's time our politicians understood that politics is not only about gaining power or remaining in power by any means. It is also about responsibility, restraint, and respect for the people. And for Bangladesh to move forward, it does not need more self-serving *netas* skilled in shouting matches and blame games. What it needs are leaders who are willing to practise ethical politics, adopt a committed and principled approach, challenge harmful traditions, eliminate corrupt practices, and use responsible language. This election, can we choose leaders who can unite the nation and work sincerely for the welfare and dignity of all people in the country? Perhaps the more pertinent question is: can we afford not to?



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

10 days of January (January 21-31), in which four people were killed and 414 others were injured. Meanwhile, 16 journalists were attacked throughout January, the ASK report added.

This pattern is not new. Since independence, Bangladeshi politics has been shaped by a narrow set of familiar narratives. Election after election, parties fall back on the same strategies of mobilising fear, blaming rivals, and stirring emotions. The country has never truly developed a strong tradition

genuine "leaders." A true leader works for the national interest, has a clear long-term vision, listens to different views, and acts with integrity. Leadership, at its core, is the ability to guide people towards a shared objective, unite differing opinions around national interests, and act with clarity, courage, and responsibility. A true leader inspires trust, communicates honestly, and works to build institutions that serve collective interests and long-term social welfare.

By contrast, a typical *netas* is often

Can the next government build a resilient energy sector?



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MOHAMMAD IFTEKHARUL ISLAM

As the interim government's term comes to an end, power is set to be transferred to the democratically elected leadership. While the outgoing authorities removed some of the most controversial practices of our energy sector, the long-term reforms are going to be the responsibility of the new government. One of the first tests for the new authorities will be whether they can build resilient renewable-energy institutions over the ruins of the previous authoritarian regime's mishaps and the interim era's quick fixes. This is the time to create a structured framework for green, renewable power.

One of its most decisive actions by the interim was the repeal of the Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply (Special Provision) Act, 2010, also known as the "Quick Rental" act. For over a decade, this indemnity law allowed shady power deals by bypassing competitive bidding and normal scrutiny. Its annulment removed a key legal shield for politically connected contracts.

The interim period also called out the habit of announcing ambitious renewable targets without the institutional capacity to deliver them. Bangladesh aimed for 10 percent renewable electricity by 2020 and later targeted 40 percent clean energy by

2041. Yet by 2025, renewables still account for only around 4-5 percent of installed capacity. Promises were made, but the groundwork was missing.

The interim government also cancelled 31 pending renewable power projects, which were approved under the Quick Rental Act. These projects were worth \$6 billion in potential investment, although they were mostly unsolicited solar deals. The energy adviser Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan argued that many of these contracts were riddled with high tariffs and unjustified capacity payments.

However, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) warned that simply scrapping projects is only a legal clean-up, not an energy strategy. Moreover, this move sent a negative signal to foreign investors. Such ad hoc discretion is dangerous whether used to approve or cancel contracts. Only strong institutions can provide both integrity and predictability. The interim government's moves proved that without proper rules and planning, even anti-corruption efforts can create uncertainty.

Bangladesh's stagnating renewable energy adoption is rooted in persistent institutional and policy gaps. First are the regulatory complications surrounding renewable energy.

The newly drafted Renewable Energy Policy, 2025, assigns the Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (Sreda) broad responsibilities to promote and oversee renewables. But licensing and approval powers are distributed among other agencies.

For example, the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) has been made the licensing authority for large renewable projects, creating overlap and bureaucratic complexity. Sreda was meant to be a one-stop agency for green energy, but it lacks the authority to go past this red tape. Meanwhile, the credibility of BERC got weakened by years of political interference and conflicting mandates. Although the interim government restored some independence in August 2024 by revoking executive pricing powers, the commission is still struggling to re-establish its credibility.

Today's elected government will inherit an energy sector partially cleared of malpractices but still lacking a clear construction strategy. The repeal of the Quick Rental Act closed a dangerous legal loophole, but legal clean-up alone does not generate electricity. The real challenge is converting this reset into predictable, bankable renewable projects.

Moreover, Bangladesh produced multiple energy plans and targets and they clash with each other. The Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan had actually aimed for a 30 percent renewable energy share by 2030, while the Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP) in 2023 proposed a 40 percent clean energy share by 2040, mostly through imports, nuclear and large hydro, with only nine percent coming from domestic renewables. At the same time, approvals for new fossil fuel projects such as coal and LNG-

based plants have continued.

This lack of alignment suggests that the renewable transition, for all its stated importance, has not yet been placed at the centre of national planning. Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) cautioned that without halting new fossil projects, the grid will remain over-supplied with conventional power and crowd out renewables.

Lastly, there are practical barriers to slowing down renewables. Land acquisition is a major hurdle, as many of the cancelled solar projects struggled to secure suitable land. Lengthy approval processes for environmental clearance and local permits further slow down the progress. Meanwhile, the national power grid is not yet ready for a large influx of renewables. Analysts point to the absence of a modern smart grid, limited transmission capacity, and weak distribution infrastructure

predictable, bankable renewable projects.

First, reforms must be locked in. Any return to emergency procurement laws for power would weaken investor confidence. Transparency and competitive bidding should be embedded firmly in the Renewable Energy Policy, 2025, and its implementing rules, including mandatory disclosure of power purchase agreements.

Second, institutional roles must be clarified. A clear division of labour is needed between Sreda, BPDB, and BERC. Sreda should be empowered to coordinate renewable energy planning and project pipelines, while overlaps in licensing must be reduced. At the same time, BERC must retain full independence in tariff setting and licensing to prevent ad hoc political intervention.

Third, competitive reverse auctions should replace unsolicited deals. A multi-year auction schedule would signal that transparent competition is now the only route to market. Clear ceiling tariffs and standardised Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) would further reduce uncertainty.

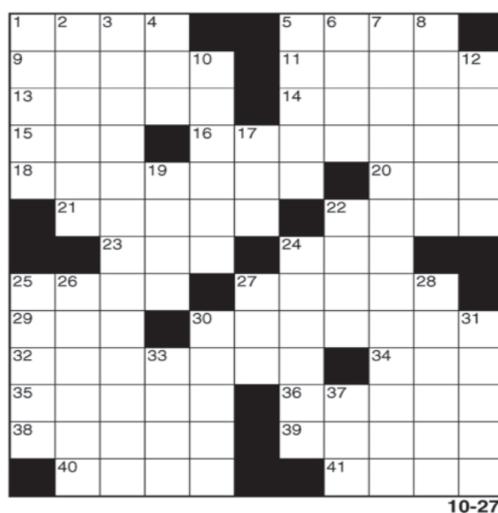
Finally, grid and land reforms must align with renewable targets. Think tanks estimate Bangladesh will need more than 35 GW of renewables by 2040, requiring coordinated investment in transmission, storage, and land access alongside generation.

The foundation of any successful energy transition is trust, from investors in stable rules, consumers in affordable service, and citizens that public money is spent responsibly. Strong institutions are the foundation of that trust, and Bangladesh's renewable transition will rise or fall on institutional strength. For the next government, the first test is not announcing new targets but building credible institutions that turn policy into power.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS
1 Plan part
5 File menu choice
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24 Eye parts
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26 Fairy king
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28 Dark-furred martens
30 Stable animal
31 Painting base
33 Bin fill
37 Target



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THE SHELF

If characters from different books went on a date

AGNILA ROY

Sometimes it sneaks up in ways you do not expect, like in the quiet chaos of a city street where rain drips off umbrellas, and the smell of frying snacks mingles with wet asphalt. You step around puddles, scuff your shoes and wonder if anyone notices. Somewhere a dog barks insistently, a rickshaw wobbles past, and someone laughs at a joke you did not hear. This reminds us that love is all around. And what better way to imagine it than picturing characters from different books meeting for a date in an alternate universe while the rest of us are still figuring out how to send a perfectly timed text.

Anindya Pakrashi from *Chowringhee* (1962) by Sankar and Rupa from *Mayurakkhi* (1990) by Humayun Ahmed

They do not speak much at first. Anindya has learnt the art of listening from hotel corridors and half-lit rooms where people confess things they never intend to fix. Rupa has learnt silence from years of watching life move ahead without asking her permission.

They walk slowly through a park that smells of dust, rain, and fried peyaju. Anindya points out a bookshop he likes, one that keeps its older titles in the back where the pages smell faintly of mildew. Rupa smiles because she understands this kind of affection for small things

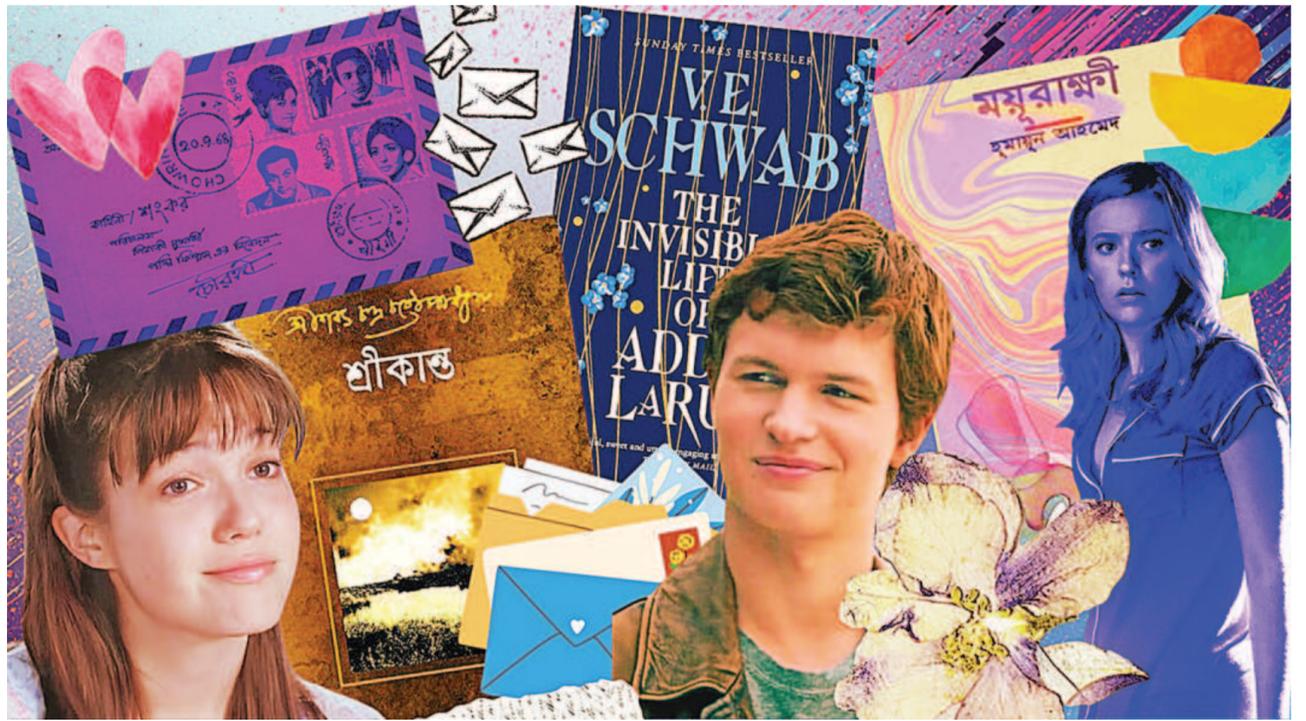


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

They had both expected this to be a disaster. However, by the time they step outside into the late afternoon sun, the awkwardness has melted into something unexpected. They do not need grand gestures or dramatic confessions. Frances feels finally seen in a way she rarely has. Sam feels understood without having to perform genius or charm.

that endure. At a roadside tea stall, they speak of how evenings stretch longer than mornings. Of how some places offer comfort without offering escape. Anindya senses the connection between them is like the monsoon wind that arrives unnoticed and then stays. He looks at Rupa, framed in the blue of her saree, and realises she is a poem he is not allowed to memorise. When they stroll around in a hooded rickshaw, there is no urgency. Only the sense that they have finally met someone who understands the weight of restraint.

Whether Anindya will step out of the hooded rickshaw and leave the Pakrashi legacy behind, or return to the safety of his cage, remains unwritten. For now, they simply sit in the quiet—waiting to see who he decides to be.

Kishore Pasha from *Tin Goyenda* (1985) by Rakib Hasan and Nancy Drew from *Nancy Drew Mystery Stories* (1930) by Carolyn Keene
Years have passed since their teenage detective days. Kishore, now quietly methodical, pores over an old case file when a familiar name catches his

eye. Somewhere across another time zone, Nancy pauses over her own notes, tracing a clue that leads her unexpectedly to him. The years have sharpened their instincts and deepened their understanding of how often truth hides behind ordinary faces.

They meet first through letters, then emails, then calls that stretch past midnight in two different time zones. They talk about cases and the strange thrill of finding a pattern where others see chaos. Kishore admires how confidently Nancy trusts her judgment. Nancy respects how patiently Kishore waits for evidence to settle.

On their virtual date, screens glow with shared documents and photographs. They argue gently over interpretations, laugh when both arrive at the same conclusion, and sit in silence when a case reminds them how fragile people can be. Distance does not weaken this bond. What matters is not the closeness of cities or hours, but the willingness to show up for each other, again and again, even when it is hard or inconvenient.

Banalata Sen from "Banalata Sen" (1942) by Jibanananda Das and Shrikanto from *Shrikanto* (1917) by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay
Shrikanto meets her when the light softens, and the road feels endless. He has walked for years through disappointment, devotion, and regret. His body is tired, but it is his heart that feels worn thin.

They sit beneath a fig tree that

trembles in the breath of evening wind. Shrikanto notices how her hair holds the faint quiet of night and how her presence drapes around him like a shawl against exhaustion. She does not ask him to explain himself. She does not interrupt. He speaks as one might speak to the earth after a long journey. How do you begin a date with someone who feels like a pause rather than a person?

Time slows. The road seems to fade. When he looks up again, she is gone, leaving behind a stillness that feels like shelter. Shrikanto continues walking, unsure if he imagined her, certain only that something within him has finally rested.

Gus Waters from *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) by John Green and Jamie Sullivan from *A Walk to Remember* (1999) by Nicholas Sparks
Some conversations begin already aware of their own fragility. While hospitals smell of disinfectant and coffee gone cold, two people find each other. Gus is the one who reaches the vending machine first, squinting at the spiral coils as if they have personally offended him. Jamie cannot help but laugh. They talk in fragments at first. About bad hospital food. About how waiting rooms distort time.

Gradually, they talk about fear without naming it directly and about hope in sentences that never say the word aloud but live in the cadence of their breath. Jamie reaches for his hand when the silence stretches too

long. Gus squeezes back, grateful for a moment where he does not have to perform strength. Their date is quiet, interrupted by nurses and announcements, but deeply present.

And for people who have learned early that life does not always deliver happily ever afters, that kind of companionship feels like grace.

Addie LaRue from *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* (2020) by V.E. Schwab and Henry from *The Time Traveller's Wife* (2003) by Audrey Niffenegger
For two souls who have never truly belonged in time, meetings are rare gifts. They find each other in a library where clocks have stopped, the faint scent of old paper and dust curling between them.

Addie knows what it means to be forgotten the moment someone turns away. Henry knows what it means to vanish without warning. And yet, for this one stolen evening, neither is alone. They do not plan a future. They do not mourn its impossibility. Every word, every laugh, every pause becomes more vivid because it cannot last. They know that when this meeting ends, it will vanish like smoke, yet the memory lingers like a heartbeat.

For the first time in years, they feel finally seen. When they see each other again, across years or lifetimes, they smile with recognition that needs no explanation.

Frances from *Conversations with Friends* (2017) by Sally Rooney and

Sam Masur from *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* (2022) by Gabrielle Zevin

Chairs scrape against the wooden floor every time a customer shifts, and the hum of conversation feels almost too loud for a first meeting. Frances stirs her tea nervously, watching the way the sunlight catches the edge of her notebook. Sam arrives carrying a sketchbook stuffed with ideas as if he has just stepped out of one of his studio sessions.

Their friends had insisted on this setup, promising it would be fun, and now they are here, awkwardly perched across from each other. Frances analyses every word before it leaves her mouth. Sam listens carefully, tilting his head like a cat, never rushing, never filling silence just to be charming.

They had both expected this to be a disaster. However, by the time they step outside into the late afternoon sun, the awkwardness has melted into something unexpected. They do not need grand gestures or dramatic confessions. Frances feels finally seen in a way she rarely has. Sam feels understood without having to perform genius or charm. For a few stolen hours, the world narrows to shared glances, quiet laughter, and the comfort of mutual recognition. And just for that evening, even the impossible feels possible.

Agnila Roy is planning to spend this week making literary couples go on dates so she can nap in peace.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Rediscovering the heroes we were never taught

Review of 'Heroes of the Islamic Golden Age' (Modina Printers & Publishers, 2025) by Chaman Rahim, PhD

MAHMUDA EMDAD

Because of colonialism and the westernisation of our education systems, many of us grow up learning history from a narrow angle not knowing about the scholars who shaped knowledge in other parts of the world. We often learn about modern science without learning where many of its ideas first came from. As a result, the lives and works of Muslim scholars from the past remain unfamiliar, even though their contributions helped build the world we live in today. *Heroes of the Islamic Golden Age* by Dr Chaman Rahim gently works against this forgetting. It introduces young readers to people who imagined, invented, and created during a time when learning flourished across the Muslim world.

The book tells the stories of eight remarkable figures who lived between the 8th and 13th centuries. Instead of presenting history as a list of dates, the book focuses on people. It shows how curiosity, creativity, and hard work shaped discoveries in science, medicine, music, and travel. The language is simple and warm,

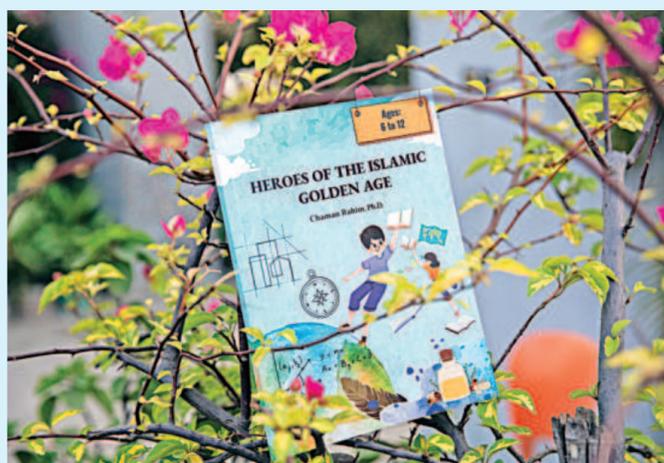


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

which makes complex ideas feel friendly and exciting to children, the book's primary target audience, rather than distant or

difficult. The journey begins with Mariam Al Astrulabi, one of the earliest known female

astronomers. The book explains how she worked with the astrolabe, an instrument used to study the sky and measure time and direction. Rather than overwhelming young readers, the explanation is clear and visual. Children learn what the astrolabe does, how it works, and why it matters in everyday life. Mariam's story also quietly challenges the idea that science has always been shaped by men. From there, the book introduces Muhammad Ibn Musa Al Khwarizmi, widely known as the father of algebra. His work in mathematics and astronomy is explained through examples that are easy to follow.

One of the most lively chapters is about Ziryab, a figure who seems larger than life. He was a musician, poet, fashion innovator, and cultural leader. The book talks about his contributions to music, the school he founded, and even how he influenced seasonal clothing and celebrations like the New Year. These details make history feel playful and human, especially for young readers.

The book also features Al-Kindi, a scholar who worked across philosophy, science, and music. Then comes the famous traveler Ibn Battuta, whose journeys across continents

are described alongside the creation of his travel account, *The Rehla*. Readers also meet Ibn Sina, whose medical writings shaped healthcare for centuries, and Al Jazari, known for his imaginative machines and mechanical designs.

A striking feature of the book is that most of these figures were not limited to one field. They were scientists and artists, thinkers and makers. This helps children see that learning does not have to stay inside one box. To keep the reading experience light and fun, the book includes illustrations, puzzles, quizzes, and visual games. These elements help children stay engaged and curious.

Heroes of the Islamic Golden Age is a wonderful starting point for young readers who want to understand history, civilisation, and the people behind everyday knowledge. It shows that the world we live in was built by many minds across many cultures, and it invites children to wonder, ask questions, and imagine themselves as future creators too.

Mahmuda Emdad is a sub-editor at Star Books & Literature.

Double Super Over and a game for the ages

T20s – the format itself – demand edge-of-the-seat thrillers, and in that regard, the T20 World Cup group-stage clash between South Africa and Afghanistan at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad delivered in full yesterday. A run-out off the fourth ball of the final over of the Afghan innings eventually pushed the match into a Super Over, while Tristan Stubbs' six off the final delivery of Fazalhaq Farooqi in the first Super Over led to an unprecedented double Super Over in a T20 World Cup game. Rahmanullah Gurbaz's three consecutive sixes even opened up the possibility of a third Super Over. That, however, did not materialise, as South Africa spinner Keshav Maharaj had Gurbaz caught off the final ball of the match, bringing an end to an epic contest that saw both teams' 20-over innings finish on 187, with 17 scored by each side in the first Super Over, before Afghanistan managed 19 while chasing 24 in the second Super Over.



PHOTO: ICC

- This was the first time a T20 World Cup match went into a second Super Over, and only the second such instance in T20s.
- Afghanistan were also involved in the other double Super Over, losing that match as well – against India in Bengaluru in 2024.
- Meanwhile, this was the fifth time a T20 World Cup match has gone into Super Overs.
- However, including yesterday's thriller between Afghanistan and New Zealand, a total of six matches have ended in ties in T20 World Cups. The first instance came in a game between India and Pakistan at the 2007 T20 World Cup, with India winning through a bowl-out.
- So far, South Africa have won both of their T20s that went into Super Overs -- against Sri Lanka in Cape Town in 2019 and in yesterday's

game.

- Afghanistan, meanwhile, are yet to win a Super Over contest in T20s, having lost all three so far.
- Quinton de Kock smashed a 41-ball 59 yesterday, becoming South Africa's top scorer in T20 World Cups with 737 runs. He surpassed AB de Villiers, who scored 717 runs in T20 World Cups.
- Rahmanullah Gurbaz's 84 off 42 is now the highest score by an Afghan batter in a T20 World Cup, surpassing his previous best of an 80-run knock against New Zealand in the last edition of the tournament.
- Yesterday's defeat means Afghanistan will not only have to win big in their next two group-stage games -- against UAE and Canada -- but also hope other results go their way.

Australia cruise past Ireland

AFP, Colombo

A depleted Australia shrugged off the loss of their captain Mitchell Marsh to injury to cruise to a dominant 67-run opening T20 World Cup win over Ireland in Colombo yesterday.

Marsh was ruled out before the match after being struck in the groin during training on Tuesday. Australia were quick to call up Steve Smith, who will fly to Sri Lanka on standby in case opener Marsh is unable to take any part in the tournament.

Australia made 182-6 after stand-in captain Travis Head elected to bat and then bowled Ireland out for 115.

Josh Inglis was promoted to open in place of Marsh and made 37 off 17 balls, while Marcus Stoinis top scored with 29-ball 45.

Nathan Ellis, who had been nursing a hamstring injury in the run-up to the tournament, bowled brilliantly to take 4-12 while spinner Adam Zampa took 4-23 as Ireland were dismissed in 16.5 overs.

Ellis ripped through Ireland's top order with two wickets in his first over and they were soon 27-4. A 46-run sixth wicket stand between Lorcan Tucker (27-ball 24) and George Dockrell (29-ball 41) offered some resistance but Ireland could never stay in hunt.

Nepal eye first win as India, SL seek momentum

AGENCIES

Three fascinating contests headline today's T20 World Cup action, each carrying its own importance.

Nepal enter their clash against Italy full of belief after pushing England to the brink in their opener, falling short by just one big hit.

Emerging stars Dipendra Singh Airee and Lokesh Bam showed they can match elite attacks, while Sandeep Lamichhane's presence continues to inspire confidence.

However, Nepal's death bowling -- conceding 33 in the final two overs -- remains an area to tighten. Italy, meanwhile, are still finding their feet at this level after a heavy defeat to Scotland and the loss of captain Wayne Madsen to injury. With nothing to lose, they'll aim to play freely and spring a surprise, but Nepal sense a golden chance to open up their group before facing West Indies.

In Delhi, India will look to shake off a nervy opening win over the USA and rediscover their high-scoring rhythm at the small-boundary Feroz Shah Kotla. Despite talk of 300, pitches haven't

been as flat as expected, making adaptability key.

Fitness concerns around Jasprit Bumrah and others like prolific opener Abhishek Sharma, who has been hospitalised with an upset stomach, add intrigue, offering Namibia a rare opportunity to challenge tournament favourites.

Namibia struggled against Netherlands but will hope to unleash their batting and make a statement on the global stage.

Sri Lanka vs Oman in Kandy presents the most tactical battle of the day. Sri Lanka would normally start as heavy favourites, but the absence of Wanindu Hasaranga has disrupted both their bowling balance and middle-order firepower.

Oman, bottom of Group B, must win to stay alive and will target Sri Lanka's vulnerable middle order with their spin-heavy attack.

With confidence from a warm-up win over Sri Lanka A, Oman believe an upset is possible.



Inaugural WBPL: BPL franchises to get priority

SPORTS REPORTER

A Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) official said on Wednesday that the board will prioritise existing Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) T20 franchises when finalising teams for the inaugural Women's Bangladesh Premier League (WBPL) T20.

"Obviously, we will give them priority. We will look for three franchises, and if they are interested, they will take the teams," BCB director Iftekhar Rahman Mithu told The Daily Star.

He added that if three franchises are not secured from current BPL owners, the board will explore alternative options.

Earlier in the day, the BCB's women's wing officially announced that the first WBPL T20 will be held from April 3 to 15, marking Bangladesh's first franchise-based T20 competition for women.

Local players -- including national cricketers and emerging talents -- will be selected through a draft system to ensure competitive balance and squad depth, while franchises will also be allowed to recruit overseas professionals to raise the tournament's standard and provide local players with international exposure.

The decision followed a recent meeting between BCB president Aminul Islam Bulbul and several board directors and officials. According to Iftekhar, the primary objective is to create more competitive match opportunities for women cricketers. Another official present at the meeting said two windows -- early April and May -- were considered, with April chosen due to greater availability of foreign players.

The WBPL governing council will be chaired by Rubaba Dowla, BCB director and chairperson of the BCB women's wing.

Mimo eyes Asian Games for last bow

SPORTS REPORTER

Experienced forward Pushkor Khisa Mimo is considering retirement from international hockey after the 20th Asian Games in Japan, subject to earning a place in the final squad for both the Asian Games Qualifiers and the Games proper.

Mimo has been recalled to the preliminary squad for the Asian Games Qualifying tournament in Oman, marking a comeback after missing recent major assignments.

Bangladesh will compete in the qualifiers in Oman from March 25 to April 25, with the top four teams securing tickets to the Asian Games, scheduled to be held in Japan from September 19 to October 4.

The 32-year-old forward has represented Bangladesh for the past 11 years. According to FIH statistics, he has scored 39 goals in 92 international appearances. However, he was left out of the 18-member squad for the Men's Asia Cup in India last year and also missed the three-match playoff against Pakistan for the 2026 Hockey World Cup Qualifiers in Dhaka in November.

Newly appointed head coach Ashiquzzaman has included Mimo in the 36-member preliminary squad, which was given a four-day break from Wednesday due to the national elections after completing a five-day training camp at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium.



"Being recalled to the preliminary squad is an honour and a chance to prove myself again. I want to try my best to secure a place in the final squad and I have a dream to retire from international hockey after the next Asian Games in Japan," Mimo told The Daily Star over the phone from Rangamati, where he travelled to cast his vote.

His dream will only be realised if he

regains his place in the national team and Bangladesh qualify for the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games.

While there is little question about his goal-scoring ability, fitness remains a concern. Mimo said he is satisfied with his condition after the recent camp.

"I am satisfied with my fitness and I think it will improve as the training progresses. I tried to train individually two to three days per week," he said.

Mimo scored twice in Tuesday's three 15-minute trial matches. The camp will resume on February 15, with players asked to report by the evening of February 14.

To make the final squad, Mimo must compete with talented juniors, around 15 of whom were called up after impressing at the FIH Men's Junior (U-21) World Cup in India.

"Most of the junior players, five to seven of whom also represent the senior team, have quality as they played in the World Cup," Mimo said. "They are ahead in terms of performance but lack experience, and I think the national team also needs experienced players. If the squad combines both, it will be excellent for the upcoming competitions."



WINDIES WEAR WIDE SMILES

West Indies' Gudakesh Motie celebrates a dismissal with his teammates during their ICC T20 World Cup clash against England in Mumbai yesterday, as the two-time champions sealed a 30-run victory to register their second successive win of the campaign. After Sherfane Rutherford's unbeaten 76 off 42 balls, featuring seven sixes and two fours, and Jason Holder's no-less-brutal 33 powered the Windies to 196 for six at the Wankhede Stadium, left-arm spinner Motie starred with three wickets as England were bowled out for 166 in 19 overs, ensuring the Caribbean side's trademark smiles remained firmly in place.

PHOTO: REUTERS



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Ensure safe participation of women in polls

UN urges all

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The United Nations has called on all stakeholders, including political leaders and their parties and supporters, to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to intimidation, harassment, and any other form of violence against women throughout the electoral process.

The participation of women candidates and voters and safety are essential to inclusive democratic processes, said the UN Resident Coordinator's office in a statement issued yesterday, on the eve of today's consequential polls.

Ahead of the 13th national election, the UN stressed that safe, inclusive, and meaningful participation in public life is a fundamental right.

"This includes the rights of all women and girls, including women with disabilities, women from minority communities, gender-diverse people, and others who may face heightened barriers, discrimination, or gender-based

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Security personnel stop a CNG-run autorickshaw for checking on Sat Masjid Road in Dhaka's Dhanmondi yesterday, as a sweeping security blanket covers the nation ahead of the 13th parliamentary polls and referendum.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

BNP mobilises grassroots to boost turnout

SAJJAD HOSSAIN

BNP is focusing on increasing turnout, with party leaders saying rival parties may attempt to sabotage or slow down the voting process and create fear among voters to keep them away from polling centres.

As part of this, according to party sources, BNP candidates in various areas are communicating with local leaders of Awami League, whose activities are now banned, to seek support from them.

The AL already directed its supporters to refrain from voting.

Last night in the chairman's Gulshan office, party chief Tarique Rahman enquired about the situation in constituencies and told party leaders that voter turnout must be increased.

He instructed grassroots leaders to ensure that voters are brought to polling centres, even by providing security if necessary, and to persuade them to cast their votes.

Senior BNP leaders said the party has taken extensive organisational measures to ensure a peaceful environment at the polling centres and to maximise participation.

The party has directed its grassroots leadership to deploy 100-500 activists outside each polling centre, depending on the number of voters, so that any unwanted situation can be resisted immediately.

The directives came from the meetings of BNP Central Election Steering Committee (CESC).

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'Guard polling centres until results are in'

BNP leader Nazrul Islam asks activists

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP yesterday urged its leaders, activists and voters to guard the centres in turns and not to leave polling stations until the results are officially declared.

"You will all go to the polling centres and cast your votes. Then you will receive the vote results and only leave after that -- we want this for a free and fair election and to form a strong government with people's support," said Nazrul Islam Khan, chairman of the BNP's electoral steering committee, at a press briefing at the party's Gulshan office around 12:00am.

At the briefing, referring to media reports, Nazrul said they had received around 127 complaints alleging that Jamaat-e-Islami leaders were detained with cash while attempting to influence voters, engage in ballot stuffing, intimidate voters and run propaganda against BNP candidates.

"On the path to the election, there are many obstacles, and efforts are being made in different ways to create more barriers. Some are doing

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Cash recoveries, centre intrusions mark polls eve

At least 21 detained or jailed across country

STAR REPORT

At least 21 people were detained or jailed for possessing cash, intruding into polling centres, and other anomalies in different districts last night.

Two others held and later released were Thakurgaon district Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Belal Uddin Prodhhan and Badrul Alam Shyamal, a close aide and cousin of BNP candidate Shahid Uddin Chowdhury Anee.

At Saidpur Airport, a team from the Bangladesh Army detained Thakurgaon district Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Belal Uddin Prodhhan with around Tk 74 lakh at around 12:00pm and later handed him over to police, said Nilphamari Superintendent of Police Sheikh Zahidul Islam.

Belal was later taken to the upazila health complex after he felt unwell and was subsequently moved to Rangpur Medical College.

He was later handed over to his family, said Saidpur Police Station Officer-in-Charge Rezaul Karim.

Police have filed a General Diary in this connection. Besides, police have filed an appeal before the Election Inquiry and Judicial Committee to take legal action in this regard, he added.

Speaking to police, Belal, who travelled from Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, claimed he is a

teacher at Thakurgaon Salandor Alia Madrasa and also runs a garment business, and that the money came from his business.

Police said they have yet to confirm whether Belal's claims are true.

HSIA Executive Director Group Captain SM Ragib Samad said the matter was reported to airport customs authorities, but they confirmed there was no objection to the money being carried.

"Additionally, there are no restrictions on carrying money on domestic routes."

Ahsanul Mahboob Zubair, assistant secretary general of Jamaat and chief of its central publicity and media department, at a press conference in Dhaka's Moghbazar yesterday, described Belal's detention as a "drama staged by law enforcement agencies" and alleged the incident was an attempt to tarnish the party's image and drag it into controversy ahead of today's election.

In Dhaka's Sutrapur area, a mobile court sentenced Md Habibur Rahman, nayebe-ameer of Sutrapur Jamaat, to two days' imprisonment immediately after his arrest, Md Nazim Uddin Al Azad, additional deputy commissioner of DMP's Lalbagh division, told The Daily Star, adding that Habibur was earlier detained over "buying votes" in the area.

Meanwhile, in Shariatpur, Golam Mostafa, a primary school teacher assigned

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'We will not leave the field'

Jamaat alleges targeted attacks before election

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Alleging attacks on party activists across the country, Jamaat-e-Islami yesterday vowed not to leave the field on election day under any circumstances.

"We, the Jamaat, will stand firm against terrorists at every polling

centre, together with the people, and ensure a fair, acceptable and peaceful election. For this, we will need the cooperation of the media," said Ahsanul Mahbub Zubair, assistant secretary general of Jamaat, speaking to reporters at the Election Commission's headquarters in Dhaka's Agargaon in the evening.

Earlier, around 4:00pm, a delegation from the 11 party electoral alliance, including Jamaat and the NCP, met with the chief election commissioner.

Following the meeting, Zubair, also chief of the party's central publicity and media department, said, "This nation drove out terrorists and fascism on August 5, 2024, and the country was freed. The country will not bow its head again."

He alleged that Jamaat activists are facing attacks in various parts



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Sports adviser's U-turn puzzles BCB, cricketers

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Bangladesh's cricket community expressed collective shock at some recent remarks from Sports Adviser Asif Nazrul, in which he appeared to shift responsibility for the country's decision to not participate in the ongoing ICC Men's T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka onto the board and the players.

During a press meet on Tuesday, Nazrul said there was "no question" of having any regrets over Bangladesh's non-participation in the marquee T20 event and claimed the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) officials and the players had decided to make this "sacrifice".

"The decision was made by the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) and the cricketers. They themselves made sacrifices for the safety of the country's cricket, for the safety of the people of the country. The role they played in upholding Bangladesh's dignity will always be held as exemplary," he said on Tuesday.

This remark contradicted what he had said on January 22, two days before International Cricket Council (ICC) replaced Bangladesh with Scotland in the World Cup.

"I am making it clear to everyone: the decision not to play the World Cup in India, considering security concerns -- is the government's decision," he had said right after a meeting with the cricketers about the World Cup participation situation.

That was the only time the players were invited to speak on the issue and afterwards, many of them expressed frustration, saying the decision was already made so there was no point to the discussion.

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Buddhist monks reach DC after 2,300-mile trek

REUTERS, Washington

Draped in burnt-orange robes, two dozen Buddhist monks arrived in Washington, DC, on Tuesday on a 2,300-mile "Walk for Peace", a self-described spiritual journey across nine states that has been cheered on by crowds of thousands.

"People want this," said Joan Donoghue, 59, from Silver Spring, Maryland, who had come out with four of her friends on Tuesday to see the monks. "I went on Sunday in Virginia and I waited outside for a long time and I talked to so many people and they all said the same thing: that our country needs this. We feel divided and people want more kindness and more compassion and more peace."

The monks began their walk in Texas more than three months ago, at times braving frigid winter temperatures, sometimes with bare feet, to raise "awareness of peace, loving kindness, and compassion across America and the world."



Although long-distance public transport is allowed during the election, there were few or no passengers on the eve of voting as most homebound travellers had already left Dhaka. This photo of buses parked at Sayedabad bus terminal was taken from Mayor Hanif Flyover yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Venezuelan authorities move Machado ally to house arrest

AFP, Caracas

A close ally of Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado was placed under house arrest Tuesday, detained just hours after his release from prison along with other dissidents jailed under ousted leader Nicolas Maduro.

Juan Pablo Guanipa, a former National Assembly vice president, walked out of jail on Sunday after spending more than eight months behind bars on vague charges of the kind often leveled against government critics, including "terrorism," money laundering and inciting violence.

The 61-year-old was released with other political prisoners under a promise made by interim leader Delcy Rodriguez, who filled Maduro's shoes after his toppling in a deadly US military raid in January.

During his few hours of freedom, Guanipa met relatives of other political prisoners, toured Caracas in a motorcycle caravan, shouted slogans outside the feared Helicoide prison, and demanded new elections.