

"I am very happy today. I became a voter 11 years ago, but this is the first time I was able to cast my ballot."

Rabiul Islam Roni, a voter of Dhaka 12

YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW

THIRD EDITION
Star

THE DAILY

ON FRIDAY

KSRM
শেকড় থেকে শিখরে

DHAKA FRIDAY FEBRUARY 13, 2026

REGD. No. DA 781

VOL. XXXVI No. 30

MAGH 30, 1432 BS

www.thedailystar.net

SHABAN 24, 1447 HJRI

16 PAGES: Tk 15.00

BNP heads for big win

Jamaat makes a strong showing, as per trends, unofficial results, party tallies as of 3:50am; peaceful voting marks historic JS polls, referendum

STAR REPORT

The BNP is on course for a thumping win in the 13th national election, where millions of voters exercised their long-denied franchise in a festive and peaceful atmosphere yesterday.

According to unofficial results and the party's own counts, the BNP and its allies were leading in 170 constituencies till the filing of this report at 3:30am today.

The party, which has been out of office for nearly two decades, was hopeful of

posted on its verified Facebook page.

The National Citizen Party (NCP), born out of the student-led uprising and a partner of the Jamaat-led alliance, won six constituencies, said Asif Mahmud Shojib Bhuyain, chief of the party's election steering committee, on his official verified Facebook page.

These unofficial results are based on tallies by political parties and data from returning officers. It was not clear whether postal ballots were taken into account.

The Election Commission was yet

Alongside electing a new parliament widely seen as critical to the country's democratic transition after years of political turmoil, voters took part in a referendum on constitutional reforms – two votes were held simultaneously for the first time in the nation's history.

securing more than a two-thirds majority with what it called "an overwhelming public mandate".

"Based on the vote count received so far and detailed seat-wise information, we are very hopeful about this victory," BNP Central Election Steering Committee Spokesperson Mahdi Amin told journalists at 11:45pm yesterday.

The Jamaat-e-Islami – once a close partner of the BNP – and its allies made significant gains, claiming victory in 60 seats, according to the party's own count

to announce official results as ballot counting was underway. It was declaring partial unofficial results of different seats. The commission also didn't announce the overall turnout till 3:50am today.

Top BNP leaders, including its Chairman Tarique Rahman and Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, won their respective constituencies as per unofficial results.

Tarique, who returned to the country after 17 years in exile in the UK, has been

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Voters wait in long lines to cast their ballots at Siraj Mia Memorial Model School in Dhaka-11's Badda area at 11:30am yesterday.



No victory rallies, just offer prayers

Tarique asks BNP leaders, activists

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman has instructed party leaders and activists not to organise any victory processions, rallies or public gatherings anywhere in the country over the election results.

Stating that the BNP stands on the verge of a historic victory in the national election, he said special prayers should be offered across the country after Juma prayers today to express gratitude to

Almighty Allah.

The remarks were conveyed by BNP Chairman's Press Secretary Saleh Shibli around 2:30am.

Yesterday, after the voting ended, Tarique spent more than nine hours at his Gulshan office, enquiring about poll results from various constituencies and speaking with party leaders across the country.

During this time, he instructed

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

Yunus thanks the nation

BSS, Dhaka

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus yesterday extended his heartfelt congratulations and gratitude to the entire nation as voting in the 13th national parliamentary election and the referendum 2026 concluded in a peaceful, orderly, and festive environment.

"The spontaneous participation of voters, the responsible conduct of political parties, the restraint shown by



candidates, and the professionalism of all institutions involved in the electoral process collectively demonstrated that our commitment to democracy remains unwavering," he said in a statement issued by his press wing after voting concluded at 4:30pm.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

Results being 'withheld' in some seats: Shafiqur

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman yesterday alleged that the results of several constituencies in the 13th national election were being "withheld" during the vote-counting process.

Speaking at a press conference at the party's Moghbazar office around 11:45pm, Shafiqur said the returning officers were delaying announcements despite counting being completed in



constituencies where his party was reportedly ahead.

Leaders of the Jamaat-led 11-party electoral alliance including Nahid Islam, convener of the National Citizen Party, Mamunul Haque, ameer of Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis; Mustafizur Rahman, chairman of Bangladesh Labour Party, were present there.

Shafiqur said, "As far as we know, we are ahead in several

SEE PAGE 6 COL 3



"We have been waiting for this day for the past one and a half years."

Chief of Army Staff
General
Waker-Uz Zaman



POLLS IRREGULARITIES 10 jailed, nine detained

3 electoral officials withdrawn

STAR REPORT

At least 10 people were jailed for different terms, nine were detained and three electoral officials were withdrawn over alleged polling irregularities during the 13th national election and referendum held yesterday.

In Kushtia-2, a mobile court sentenced a man to three years in prison and fined Tk 1,000 for attempting to flee with a ballot paper from the Talbaria High School polling centre, said Mirpur Upazila Nirbahi Officer Nazmul Islam.

In Panchagarh's Atwari upazila, a leader of Jatiya Jubo Shakti, the youth wing of the National Citizen Party, was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for possessing sample ballot papers at the Atwari Pilot High School polling centre around 10:00am, said Atwari Police Station's Officer-in-Charge Motiur Rahman.

In Habiganj-2, a mobile court sentenced a young man to two years' imprisonment on the allegation of creating unrest at a polling centre at Mandari Government Primary School polling centre in Baniachong upazila, said Baniachong UNO Mahmuda Begum Sathi.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4



PHOTO: REUTERS

Electoral workers sort ballots before counting votes, during the 13th general election in Dhaka, yesterday.

Pro-Jamaat actors dominate polls-day disinformation

Analysis of 100 content shows

STAR REPORT

Disinformation reached a fever pitch during Bangladesh's 13th parliamentary polls as spin doctors launched a relentless campaign on Facebook and Telegram, beginning on the eve of the election and surging through the voting period yesterday.

Various political actors, appearing to be aligned with the Awami League, Jamaat-e-Islami, and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), weaponised social media platforms to confuse and panic voters as well as erode trust in traditional media.

The surge started hours before voting began and continued through the day.

This digital deceit involved tactics such as resurfacing years-old "zombie content," circulating AI-generated deepfakes and deploying fabricated news photocards that falsely claimed candidate withdrawals and election cancellations.

The Daily Star documented 100 instances of disinformation disseminated through Facebook and Telegram beginning 8:00pm on February 11 and ending after voting closed at 4:30pm yesterday.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1



Polls catch the eyes of global media

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh's historic election yesterday drew the attention of global media, which highlighted the backdrop of the polls, possible outcomes, the challenges it faces and expectations of the people for a democratic and inclusive country.

Apart from about 400 foreign observers, nearly 200 foreign journalists are covering the polls and the referendum on the reforms, which were held 18 months after the July uprising.

The New York Times ran a story – titled “Bangladesh Holds Elections on Thursday. Here's What to Know” – that said many Bangladeshis see the election as a chance to build an inclusive democracy with safeguards against authoritarian rule and against the widespread corruption.

This election is significant because millions of voters are casting their ballots for the first time.

Stating that Awami League is not in the polls race, Times said this leaves the BNP as the dominant player and its chairman Tarique Rahman expected to become the next prime minister.

The other major party, Jamaat-e-Islami, has made significant inroads by playing on people's anger at the demonisation of Muslims, particularly by the Hindu right-wing movement in neighbouring India.

The alliance of the new party born out of the July uprising – National Citizen Party – upset many students and those who want Bangladesh to be more secular, moderate and inclusive, it added.

The British newspaper Guardian ran two reports: one on February 11 and the other on February 12.

The first one – titled, “Women's freedoms are at stake”: concern at rise of Islamist party before Bangladesh election” – said despite the July uprising that called for an inclusive society, for swathes of women in the country, the hope of the election has become tinged with disappointment and fear amid a resurgence of regressive Islamist politics.

Limited polling suggests the BNP will win the election but it appears as if Jamaat-e-Islami will earn a historic share of the vote and be a significant force after the election.

Critics say the resurgence of conservative Islamist politics has already begun to seep into society.

While Jamaat-e-Islami has

SEE PAGE 6 COL 3



PHOTO: BNP MEDIA CELL, STAR

Clockwise from left... BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman, his wife, Zubaida Rahman, and their daughter, Zaima Rahman, pose for a family photo after casting ballots; BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir votes at Thakurgaon Government Girls' High School; NCP Convener Nahid Islam exercises his franchise at AKM Rahmatullah University College in Badda.

First-time voters hoping for a new dawn

STAR REPORT

As voting in the 13th parliamentary election and a nationwide referendum began yesterday morning, first-time and young voters turned out in large numbers across the country, many describing the experience as emotional and historic.

Polling opened at 8:00am amid tight security, with queues forming early at several centres.

Law enforcement personnel were deployed nationwide.

At Mirzapur Government Primary School polling centre in Rajshahi city, Peyari Begum, a resident of Hanuful Mor, arrived around 7:30am. “I did not vote last time. This time it feels like Eid. Everyone has come together early in the morning to vote. It feels festive,” she said.

In Dhaka-9, Sumaiya Akter Mim, a class 12 student, cast her first ballot alongside her parents and also took part in the referendum on constitutional reforms.

“There was a lot of tension about whether I would be able to vote. I came feeling quite scared. However, I was able to cast my vote in a peaceful environment for my preferred candidate,” she said.

At the Monipur High School polling centre in Dhaka-15, 25-year-old Tajia Khan

voted with her mother, Khadija Begum. Both said they felt proud after casting their ballots.

Twin siblings Saima and Sajid also voted for the first time at the same centre. Saima, 23, a fourth-year electrical engineering student at Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology, said she returned home on leave specifically to vote.

“I am here to uphold democracy. I want to see democracy firmly established everywhere,” she said.

Her brother Sajid, a student at Sir Salimullah Medical College Mitford Hospital, said social media posts the previous night had raised concerns.

“But when I arrived at the centre this morning, I found the environment calm and well organised,” he said, adding that he also participated in the referendum.

In Dhaka-1, 18-year-old Sabbir Hossain said he had been excited since the previous day.

“This is my first time voting. I am very happy to cast my vote for my preferred candidate,” he said.

Hasib Islam, a mechanical engineering student at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, cast his first ballot at Mirpur University College centre.

“I feel really good to have voted for the first time. I was able to vote in an orderly

manner within a short time,” he said.

At Ideal Public School centre in Matikata Bazar under Dhaka-17, 27-year-old Naznin Ayesha voted for the first time.

At Kisholoy High School in Mohammadpur, Wajihaba, a university admission candidate, said she was initially nervous.

“But I didn't face any difficulty. Everything went very smoothly and it was faster than I expected,” she said, adding that she cast two ballots – one for the parliamentary candidate and another for the referendum.

“We got exactly what we were told beforehand, including the yes-no vote and the candidates. It was simple, and it went well,” she added.

Across constituencies, many young voters said the atmosphere felt different from previous elections.

“It feels like we finally have the freedom to express our voice and make our own decision,” said one voter.

After years without a competitive national election, a large segment of the electorate is casting ballots in a closely contested race for the first time. Alongside the parliamentary vote, citizens also took part in a referendum on proposed constitutional reforms aimed at strengthening democratic institutions and accountability.

Voting festive, peaceful

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Election monitors from the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) yesterday said voting in the 13th national polls and referendum was mostly festive, orderly, and peaceful.

After visiting 414 polling booths across all eight divisions – 169 in rural areas and 234 in urban locations – covering 71 percent of the country's 64 districts, ANFREL said nearly 90 percent reports from its observers found no discrepancies in general voting procedures.

However, it noted that most polling stations lacked ramps and wheelchair access, creating mobility barriers for persons with disabilities and elderly voters.

The observers also reported activities, such as political party-operated voter identification desks distributing voter slips in the vicinity of several polling stations, which, they feared, may facilitate vote-buying.

In a post-poll statement, ANFREL said that although most centres opened in an orderly manner, some experienced minor delays that prevented polling agents and observers from entering on time.

“This led to tensions and, in isolated instances,



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

European Union observers speak to a polling agent at Tejgaon Polytechnic Girls' High School centre in Dhaka-12, half an hour before voting closed at 4:30pm yesterday.

physical confrontations between representatives of competing parties,” it said.

ANFREL said 94 percent of observed polling stations closed on time, with no reported incidents disrupting the process. The counting also proceeded without major disruption, except at two centres where polling agents raised concerns.

More than 50 percent of ANFREL observers reported that presiding officers failed to announce the serial numbers when opening ballot boxes. Nearly one-third said counting centres were not under CCTV surveillance, and 30 percent reported that presiding officers did not ensure separate counting of parliamentary and referendum ballots.

Security arrangements were extensive and highly visible throughout the electoral process, it noted.

Meanwhile, election observers from the

SEE PAGE 6 COL 6

Pro-Jamaat actors dominate polls-day disinformation

FROM PAGE 1

This newspaper logged the disinformation as it appeared, without any regard for the political affiliation of the actors.

The content includes 37 photocards mimicking news agencies, 30 videos, eight images and three deepfakes.

About 65 percent of the disinformation documented by this newspaper was spread by entities that appear to be aligned with Jamaat. AL-aligned actors trailed by 21.21 percent, pro-BNP groups 7 percent and National Citizen Party-aligned users pushed 3 percent of the content.

At 12:20am yesterday, a Facebook page named InfoBangla claimed that the election will not take place.

Miraj Ahmed Chowdhury, who leads fact-check organisation Dismislab, called this category of disinformation among the most harmful. He said that Dismislab itself debunked nearly a dozen instances of disinformation claiming that candidates have withdrawn from the elections.

Another fact-checking organisation FactWatch debunked photocards floating on social media claiming that two major candidates for the Barguna-2 seat Nurul Islam Moni (BNP) and Dr Sultan Ahmed (Jamaat) had withdrawn from the election at the last minute.

To make these claims appear legitimate, the disinformation campaign deployed fabricated “photocards” mimicking well-known Bangladeshi news outlets, including Bangla dailies Prothom Alo, Inqilab, Jugantor and Amar Desh as well as Jamuna Television.

Both candidates contested the election.

Dismislab spotted a fake Jamuna TV photocard claiming BNP called an emergency press conference to boycott the election. Dismislab confirmed this was fake.

FALSE VIOLENCE

At least 43 pieces of disinformation were disseminated on social media by pro-Jamaat actors specifically targeted at BNP, mostly accusing them of being criminals and

conducting violence.

A primary tactic involved resharing old news and presenting it as breaking news to frame BNP members as criminals or rapists on election day.

A pro-Jamaat Telegram group called BasherKella posted a photo of a weapons seizure around 8:50pm on February 11, claiming “Chhatra Dal and Jubo Dal leaders were arrested with arms by the army in Feni.”

The photo shared was from an operation by joint forces in Feni on September 18, 2024, where two men named Ziauddin Dalim and Jiban Krishna De were arrested in the Kazirbag area of Feni Sadar. The recovery happened in Hokdi and Baligaon areas of Feni Sadar Upazila, according to Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR).

Miraj Ahmed, who leads Dismislab, said disinformation about violence taking place before the elections is a method of voter suppression, to dissuade voters from showing up.

Multiple pro-Jamaat entities also circulated old news reports from 2021 and 2025 regarding rape allegations against Chhatra Dal leaders. They presented these events as having happened “today” or “yesterday” to incite moral outrage.

Another Jamaat-aligned social media user claimed that on February 11, Chhatra Dal activists raped a young woman in Jashore. “Even today, they haven't stopped! They're going to start a “grand festival” the day after tomorrow!” the post claimed. The incident took place on March 17, 2024.

The pro-BNP entities reciprocated. One post circulated a video claiming that a vast quantity of weapons was recovered from the car of the son of a Jamaat leader in Comilla. The narrative suggested these weapons were gathered to rig the election.

Another pro-BNP page posted a photo of a man at 1:27am yesterday claiming that a Jubo Dal man died in an attack by activists loyal to National Citizen Party leader Abdul Hannan

Masud.

The Daily Star's local correspondent confirmed that while there was a scuffle in Hatiya late at night, no casualties were reported, and the army intervened to stop the violence.

Prof Din Md Sumon Rahman, Head of Media Studies and Journalism at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh and the founder of Factwatch, called this disinformation one of the “most harmful” of the night.

“Claims of deaths can seriously harm the quality of the election, especially when candidates

themselves are also sharing these posts,” said Prof Rahman.

Attack on media

Social media activity from pro-Jamaat entities reveals a coordinated narrative portraying mainstream media as a biased apparatus facilitating a purported “media coup” to benefit the BNP, an analysis of 29 such Facebook posts shows.

These posts claimed that mainstream media outlets, including Jamuna TV, Kaal Bela and Prothom Alo, suppressed reports of alleged electoral irregularities by the BNP while actively targeting Jamaat through “information terrorism.”

These narratives frequently employed the word “fascism” against

the media. Many posts claimed that the same media outlets that allegedly enabled authoritarianism during the Awami League are now doing the same, “creating a monster” in the BNP (1, 2, 3).

Engagement metrics suggest that these narratives gain significant traction when amplified by high-profile figures.

A post by social media influencer Pinaki Bhattacharya accused three major media outlets of controlling the media headlines. Similarly, a video by Elias Hossain, another social media influencer, alleged of a “media coup” to undermine Jamaat's

specifically targeted Jamaat with three pieces of disinformation documented by this newspaper, but more than half of their tirade was aimed at the voters.

A reel posted by a pro-AL Facebook page at 3:16am on February 12, four hours before voting centres opened, claimed that votes had already been cast at a polling centre in Gazipur-2.

“Done and dusted before Tahajjud. The countdown is real! Praying that Fajr brings the results along with the sunrise,” said the reel, which showed an old video of officers counting ballots.

A pro-AL Telegram group Area71 posted a video at 8:00pm on February 11, claiming that “Voting has started at the Jubilee School and College centre located in Ward No. 43 under Dhaka-6” in old town.

Sutrapur Police Station OC (Investigation), Mohaimen, told The Daily Star no such thing happened there. According to his investigation, the Presiding Officer was actually distributing identification cards to the polling agents, which was misrepresented as a scene of ballot stuffing.

A pro-AL Facebook user shared an AI-generated video at noon with the caption, “All the voting in the Jashore-2 constituency was completed last night. This is Yunus's ‘healthy’ election. It's happening, but don't mind it – these are ‘healthy’ votes.”

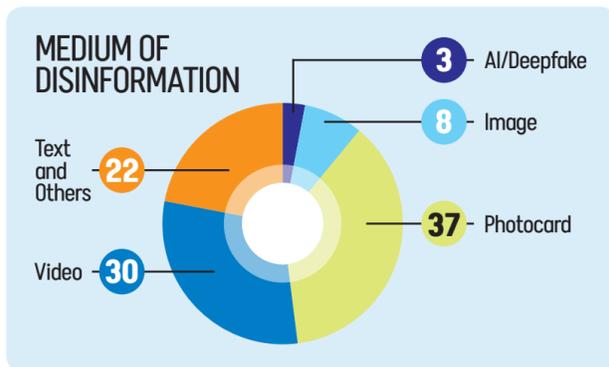
The video showed masked men in caps making the same repetitive stamping motions and stuffing ballots into box cartons.

Dismislab found social media posts falsely claiming that police had raided the home of Jamaat Master Abdur Rahim in Daganbhuayan, Feni, recovering ballot papers and arresting him.

According to Dismislab, while police did conduct a raid on his house based on a tip-off, they neither found ballot papers nor arrested him.

Reporting: Zyma Islam and Abdullah Hel Bubun

Research: Mir Rownak, Nourin Sultana, Abir Ayon, Tarek Hosen



[Zyma Islam is a senior reporter and Mir Rownak, Abdullah Hel Bubun, Nourin Sultana, Abir Ayon and Tarek Hosen are interns at The Daily Star]

Ctg-4 result withheld over pending appeal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission has decided to withhold publication of the result of the Chattogram-4 constituency in the 13th national election, citing a pending appeal before the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court.

In an official communication issued by the EC Secretariat, the commission said the decision followed an order passed by the Appellate Division on February 3 in connection with a petition earlier disposed of by the High Court Division.

On that day, the apex court ruled that BNP candidate Mohammad Aslam Chowdhury could contest the election from Chattogram-4 in accordance with the law. However, it directed that the final publication of the election result for the constituency would remain withheld until disposal of a leave-to-appeal petition challenging the HC verdict that cleared his candidacy.

In compliance with the court order, the commission said it was under a legal obligation to refrain from publishing the result of the seat until a conclusive decision is reached by the SC.

The Appellate Division also permitted Jamaat-e-Islami candidate Md Anwar Siddique to proceed with his leave-to-appeal petition against the HC judgment.

Anwar's counsel, Advocate Mohammad Hossain Lipu said his client had challenged the EC's decision to allow Aslam to contest, alleging that the BNP candidate has outstanding loans amounting to Tk 2,100 crore from 23 banks.



ANTICIPATION, PRIDE ACROSS DHAKA CITY

Polling centres across Dhaka city came alive yesterday as young first-time voters lined up with the elderly, each determined to make their voices count in the 13th national election. The mood was a mix of anticipation and pride: families arriving together, neighbours exchanging greetings, and a sense of community running through the queues. Security forces kept a close watch, ensuring order as the day unfolded. The overall atmosphere felt festive as citizens embraced their democratic duty.

PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS, PALASH KHAN, RASHED SHUMON,
ORCHID CHAKMA, MEHEDI HASAN





Turnout 38.4% in Tungipara

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gopalganj

Tungipara, the ancestral home and former electoral stronghold of ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina, had been expected to record one of the lowest turnouts in the election. Instead, the constituency delivered a surprise, with a higher-than-anticipated number of voters casting their ballots.

Despite the Awami League being barred from the polls, after the voting ended at 4:30pm yesterday, Upazila Nirbahi Officer Zahurul Alam said voter turnout in Tungipara stood at 38.40 percent.

Voter presence was thin at polling centres in the Gopalganj-3 (Tungipara-Kotalipara) constituency in the morning after voting began at 7:30am, but steadily increased as the day wore on.

Of the 93,903 registered voters in Tungipara upazila, 36,061 exercised their franchise.

Visits to several polling centres found no long queues at most locations, except at Tungipara Government College centre, where nearly 20 percent of votes had been cast by 12:00pm.

SEE PAGE 6 COL 8

BNP reclaims Obaidul Quader's Noakhali-5 Jamaat was also in close contest

ANWARUL HAIDER, Noakhali

Noakhali 5, seen as Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader's "impenetrable fortress" for a decade and a half, transformed into a fiercely contested battleground for the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami after the 2024 uprising.

Mohammad Fakhru Islam, a Dhaka-based businessman, finally reclaimed the seat for the BNP in the 13th parliamentary polls yesterday by bagging 1,47,808 votes.

His nearest rival, Jamaat's Maulana Belayet Hossain, secured 1,20,453, according to unofficial results published at around 2:00am today.

With Quader absent and the Awami League organisationally weakened, both Fakhru and Belayet campaigned door-to-door, expressing strong optimism about victory from the seat.

Historically, the main contest in this seat, comprising Companiganj, Kabirhat and a portion of Sadar upazila, was between Quader and the late senior BNP leader Barrister Moudud Ahmed.

SEE PAGE 6 COL 6



Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin casting his ballots in the 13th parliamentary polls and referendum at Eskaton Garden High School centre in the capital's Ramna yesterday.

PHOTO: PTD

Queues, selfies and festivities define polls day in Dhaka

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

It was as if Eid came a month early. Families thronged the streets, voters reconvened with friends in voting centres, snacked on street-side delicacies from the few hawkers who opened shop, proudly shot selfies with their inked thumbs, and most importantly – for a full day became masters of the state.

The Daily Star's correspondents visited 286 centres across Dhaka city, and the two most repeated words in their descriptions were "peaceful" and "joyful", with a sparse smattering of allegations of irregularities.

After the official voting hours ended, different groups of people brought out processions in the surrounding areas, adding to the day's political atmosphere. Rabiul Islam Roni, 29, an electrical mechanic, was the last voter to cast his ballot at the Bottomley Home Girls High School polling centre in Dhaka-12 yesterday. Roni, who earns his living through daily mechanical work, was unable to visit the polling centre earlier for his morning shift. He finished his duty and rushed to the centre, arriving just three minutes before voting officially ended. His last-minute arrival marked a determined effort to take part in the democratic process.

"I am very happy today. I became a voter

11 years ago, but this is the first time I was able to cast my ballot."

Afsara Rahman was a first-time voter from Dhaka-17. After casting her ballot at Banani Bidiyaniketan School, she said, "It feels like if I did not come here, it would be an injustice to the country... I feel that my vote matters in the formation of the government."

BNP Chairperson Tarique Rahman, a candidate in the constituency, cast his vote at Gulshan Model School and College, accompanied by members of his family.

Some voters turned the day into an educational experience.

In Dhaka-9, Tasnova, a private sector employee who cast her vote at a centre in Basabo, brought her children to the centre specifically to show them that voting does not always mean "chaos, threats and trouble".

"I came out to show the children what a voting day looks like. They have grown up thinking voting means chaos, threats and trouble. But this time the environment felt different after I cast my vote, so I brought them along."

Her daughter Manaka, an intermediate second-year student, said, "It feels festive. This time, there is a choice. Earlier, we heard there wasn't really an option. We hope such an environment continues so

that we can also vote in the future."

The atmosphere outside the centres in the constituency was vibrant.

BNP supporters were observed distributing biryani in large quantities to their backers. Additionally, rickshaws were reportedly dedicated to transporting BNP voters to and from the polling stations.

However, independent candidate in Dhaka-9, Tasnim Jara, while visiting Khilgaon Model College yesterday, alleged that her polling agents faced obstruction at several centres, with many denied entry or expelled on what she described as "baseless and fabricated" grounds.

"My polling agents are being prevented from entering centres or are being forced out using various made-up excuses. Some are being told, 'You are not a voter here,' even though there is no rule requiring a polling agent to be a voter of that particular constituency."

She further alleged that female polling agents were being barred from male polling centres under non-existent regulations. "They are also repeatedly being told that phones cannot be brought inside, whereas the rule is that phones may be carried but cannot be used. Under these excuses, our agents are being pushed out even as voting continues inside."

SEE PAGE 6 COL 1

Ballots before lunch, then crowds thinned Star observed in 2 constituencies

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Most voters in Dhaka hurried to polling centres and cast their ballots before lunchtime yesterday amid tight security, with no major incidents reported. That, at least, was the common picture in two constituencies.

The Daily Star correspondents stayed at polling centres at Government Science College in Dhaka-12 and Motijheel Ideal School and College in Dhaka-8 constituencies from 7:00am to 5:00pm, tracking the rhythm of the vote from opening hour to close.

Supporters and polling agents of different candidates were found setting up tables about 400 metres from the centres to help voters find their serial numbers. Police and army personnel, however, did not allow anyone, including voters, to hang around anywhere close to the premises.

At Government Science College in Farmgate area under the Dhaka-12 constituency, queues thinned sharply after 1:00pm, leaving the centre almost deserted.

After lunch, voters arrived only sporadically, usually no more than two every ten minutes. No one turned up after 3:30pm, an hour before voting ended at 4:30pm.

At the college, there were two centres. Official counts put turnout at Centre 1 at 31.88 percent. Centre 2 fared slightly better, with turnout reaching 39.88 percent.

At Motijheel Ideal School and College, under the Dhaka-8 constituency, the voting pattern was almost the same – a moderate rush in the morning, a brief lull around lunchtime, and a thin queue thereafter.

At 4:20pm, police used loudspeakers to urge people to come and cast their votes quickly, reminding them that polling would end at 4:30pm. However, only six voters entered the centre in the final ten minutes.

A 'LOST' AGENT

At the Motijheel Ideal School and College centre, one Hosne Ara Begum identified herself as representing the "Shapla Koli" candidate Nasiruddin Patwari.

Confusion followed when another person at the same booth also claimed to be an agent of Patwari, as rules allow only one agent per booth.

Patwari is the chief coordinator of the National Citizen Party (NCP) and contested the election as the Jamaat-led 11-party alliance candidate for Dhaka-8.

In the afternoon, the matter was resolved only after Hosne Ara produced her identity card, which showed she was in fact an agent of independent candidate Md Golam Sarwar, who contested with the Pen symbol.

With permission from the presiding officer, The Daily Star correspondent spoke to polling agents at several booths. During these conversations, Hosne Ara appeared unaware until the afternoon which candidate she was representing.

Later in the day, Patwari, who contested against BNP Standing Committee Member Mirza Abbas, alleged that "dummy agents" from different candidates "were working in favour of Abbas."

Faizur Rahman Dipu and Saurur Rahman Zihan, polling agents for BNP and Jatiya Party respectively, rejected the allegation.

AKM Anwarul Kabir, in charge of the centre on behalf of BNP candidate Mirza Abbas, also denied the claim.

At the centre, Kabir was seen offering breakfast and later lunch to polling agents from BNP, Jatiya Party, NCP and independent candidates. "From a good political gesture, Mirza Abbas has sent food for all," he said.

Nurul Islam, the presiding officer of the centre, said voting was held peacefully.

BNP heads for big win

FROM PAGE 1

elected from both Dhaka-17 and Bogura-6, according to unofficial results from the EC and party sources.

Among BNP parliamentary committee members, Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain won Cumilla-1; Mirza Abbas secured Dhaka-8; and Abdul Moyeen Khan won Narsingdi-2. Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury was elected from Chattogram-11, and Salahuddin Ahmed from Cox's Bazar-1.

On the other hand, Jamaat Nayebe-Ameer Syed Abdullah Mohammed Taher was leading the race in Cumilla-12, while Nayebe-Ameer ATM Azharul Islam from Rangpur-2, and Barrister Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem Arman from Dhaka-14 were ahead of their competitors in their respective constituencies.

NCP Convener Nahid Islam was leading the race in Dhaka-11, while Member Secretary Akhter Hossen from Rangpur-4, Chief Organiser (Southern Region) Hasnat Abdullah from Cumilla-4, and Joint Convener Atik Mujahid from Kurigram-2 were ahead of their rivals, according to unofficial results.

The candidates entered the fray after 20 days of high-octane campaigning that swept across every corner of the country. This election saw a unique blend of seasoned political veterans and a new generation of vibrant leaders born out of the student-led uprising.

Yesterday, thousands of men and women – some on crutches or in wheelchairs – queued patiently for hours at polling centres across the country. They stood without fear, reclaiming the opportunity to choose representatives for 299 of the 300 parliamentary seats.

The presence of women voters was overwhelming, with many arriving in groups, reflecting broad participation that cut across age and gender.

Alongside electing a new parliament widely seen as critical to the country's democratic transition after years of political turmoil,

voters took part in a referendum on constitutional reforms – two votes were held simultaneously for the first time in the nation's history.

As of the last count, "Yes" got 215,579 votes while "No" received 80,203 votes.

The parliamentary election, held 18 months after an unprecedented student-led uprising toppled the Awami League government, reflected the interim government's commitment to delivering a free, fair and transparent election.

The voter turnout was 47.91 percent till 2:00pm, according to the EC data from 36,031 out of 42,651 polling centres across the country.

The AL has been barred from contesting the election for its role in the brutal crackdown that claimed at least 1,400 lives.

Unlike the previous polls marred by deadly clashes, arson attacks and sweeping allegations of irregularities, yesterday's vote saw only sporadic and low-intensity incidents. Reports of violence were few and far between, and allegations of fake voting appeared minimal compared to past experiences.

Meanwhile, at least eight people, including a presiding officer and a polling officer, died after falling ill inside or near polling stations during voting hours in seven districts.

The country was draped in a security blanket, with members of the armed forces, police and other law enforcement agencies guarding and patrolling polling stations to prevent any untoward incidents.

Inside the centres, the EC kept the management orderly and efficient, ensuring a steady and calm flow of voters throughout the day. Outside, colourful election bunting strung across roads and walkways fluttered in the breeze, adding a festive touch that matched the spirit of the occasion.

The scenes remained largely consistent throughout the day – from the start of the polling at 7:30am to

the end at 4:30pm. While turnout was low in the early hours, it gradually picked up, with long queues forming at some centres by midday.

The distinctly calm, festive mood of the election remained intact despite instances of mismanagement reported in some polling centres in the capital and elsewhere. A few voters were left disheartened when they discovered their ballots had already been cast in their names.

Young voters, making up 43.56 percent of the 12.10 crore electorate, showed up in droves, their eyes bright with excitement as they searched for their serial numbers, eager to cast their ballots.

The first-time voters were especially enthusiastic, holding up ink-marked thumbs as badges of honour to show they had taken part in shaping the nation's future.

Many of them, having seen their rights curtailed in previous elections, cheered with relief and pride after finally exercising their franchise.

"It feels great to vote for the first time. I am happy to cast my vote peacefully," said Nusrat Ahmed Sneha, a first-time voter from Dhaka-6.

"We want a government that prioritises young people and works for the welfare of the country," she said.

After casting ballots at Kalyanpur Girls' School and College, Rafiqul Islam, a 26-year-old voter, said, "This is the first vote I've been able to cast. Over the past decade, I didn't feel the situation was right. I want a leader who represents the country with dignity. We are tired of conflict – we want stability and progress. Whoever forms the government should strengthen our country's global standing," he said.

Another voter, Asha Akter, expressed satisfaction with the orderly environment inside the polling centre.

"Earlier, there used to be irregularities in voting, but this time

I did not see that. I hope whichever party comes to power will be women friendly," she said.

Sammi Akter Nitol, a resident of Dhaka's Gandaria area, said she felt relieved to be able to vote after a long gap.

"Over the past 17 years, we were deprived of our voting rights. It feels very good to vote today. I want a government that is free from corruption and extortion," she said.

Social media was flooded with posts of people of different ages, especially the young, proudly displaying their ink-marked thumbs, sharing selfies and short videos with captions about their first vote.

Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus described the election and referendum as a moment of national joy and renewal.

"This is a day of great joy. Today is the birthday of a new Bangladesh. We will celebrate this birthday throughout the day," he told reporters after casting his vote at 10:26am at Gulshan Model High School and College.

Later, he extended his heartfelt congratulations and gratitude to the entire nation.

"The spontaneous participation of voters, the responsible conduct of political parties, the restraint shown by candidates, and the professionalism of all institutions involved in the electoral process collectively demonstrated that our commitment to democracy remains unwavering," he said in a statement issued by his press wing after voting concluded at 4:30pm.

After casting his vote at Adamjee Cantonment College polling centre, Chief of Army Staff General Waker-Uz-Zaman said he had been waiting for this day for the past one and a half years, hoping for a fair election.

Calling upon voters to cast their ballots without fear, he said, "Today is a very important day for us."

The army chief also praised the role of media personnel, noting that

they play a vital role in informing the public about the situation.

BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman appeared confident of victory after casting his vote at Gulshan Model High School and College in Gulshan-2.

"If we form the government, we will prioritise improving law and order in the country so that people feel secure.

"I have exercised my constitutional right to vote. For more than a decade, the people of Bangladesh have been waiting for this day," he said.

Later, Tarique briefed reporters at the party chairman's office in Gulshan, and said, "If the election is free and fair without any controversy, then why would we not accept it? Of course, we will accept it. All parties will accept it. But there is one condition here. The election must be neutral and peaceful."

At a press conference, the Jamaat-led 11-party alliance described the voting process as "excellent," expressing hope of securing a "landslide victory" and the "highest number" of seats. It, however, raised allegations of some isolated incidents of violence and irregularities.

Jamaat Ameer Shafiqur Rahman was optimistic that his party would form the government through the voters' mandate.

"If the voting is held in a free and fair manner, we will accept the results. Others should also accept the verdict of the people," he told reporters after casting his ballot around 8:30am at the Monipur High School and College polling centre.

"Through this vote, we hope to see the formation of a government that does not belong to any individual, family, or party, but to the 18 crore people of this country," he said.

However, in a post on his verified Facebook page at 3:50pm, Shafiqur alleged that attempts were being made to cast fake votes in different parts of the country.

Principal dies after Thailand school shooting

AFP, Bangkok

A teenage shooter accused of killing the principal of a school in Thailand using a police officer's weapon was in custody yesterday, authorities said, after an attack that also injured two students.

Police shot and arrested the 18-year-old on Wednesday after he stormed into the Phatong Prathan Khirawat School in southern Songkhla province with a gun, police and other authorities said, adding that several shots were fired.

School director Sasiphat Sinsamosorn died in hospital early yesterday after being admitted with gunshot wounds and undergoing surgery, the Songkhla public relations department said in a statement.

She was shot before police intervened and apprehended the teenager, Songkhla police chief Teerasak Chaiyotha told AFP.

The 18-year-old suspect was being treated in hospital after being grazed by a bullet and had not been charged pending an investigation, Teerasak said.

Police had responded to a report of a teenager "acting erratically," he said. Teerasak told reporters on Wednesday that the suspect was hospitalised for psychiatric treatment in December and had been discharged.

He said the teen stabbed a police officer with a knife and stole his weapon – a 9mm pistol – just before the incident at the school, which he then used to carry out the attack.

Sasiphat was shot in the chest and died in hospital from blood loss, the Songkhla department said, calling her a "brave teacher".

The school shared its "deepest condolences" in a Facebook post.

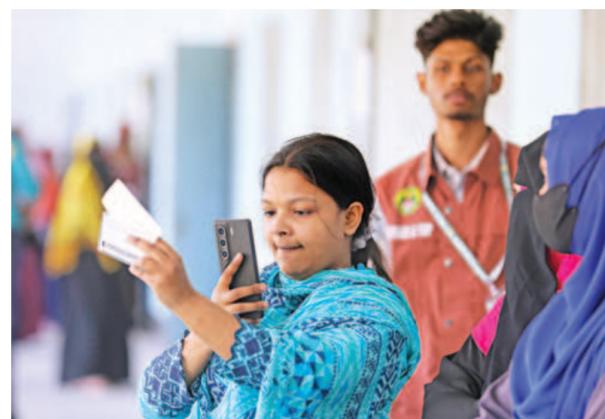
"Although we have lost her, the memories and kindness she left behind will forever remain in our hearts," the post said.



NATION RECLAIMS VOTING RIGHTS

People from all sections of life -- women, men, young and old -- voted yesterday as the country held its first parliamentary election since the 2024 uprising, with 173 million citizens seeking a return to democracy after years of turmoil and autocratic rule. It was a festive atmosphere all around with families and friends queued up to exercise their right to franchise throughout the day amid heightened security. The photos were taken in Kishoreganj, Chattogram, Khulna, Feni, Narayanganj, and Rajshahi.

PHOTOS: RAJIB RAIHAN, TAFSILUL AZIZ, ABU TAHER, AZAHAR UDDIN





Voting held peacefully in three hill districts

STAR REPORT

Voting in the 13th national election was held in a peaceful and festive atmosphere yesterday across the three hill districts – Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachhari – with no major untoward incidents reported.

While voter turnout was comparatively low in Bandarban, long queues were seen at many polling centres in Rangamati and Khagrachhari.

In Bandarban, voter presence was relatively thin at most centres since voting began at 7:30am.

At the Government Girls' High School centre in Bandarban town, Presiding Officer Satyajit Majumdar said around 55 percent of the 3,784 registered voters cast their ballots by the time voting ended at 4:30pm.

A similar picture was seen at the Bus Station Government Primary School centre, where female voter turnout was comparatively higher. Presiding Officer Abu Hasan Md Nayeem said about 56 percent of the 3,311 registered voters exercised their franchise.

Election officials said turnout at remote centres ranged between 45 and 55 percent.

According to district administration sources, voting was held at 186 centres for a total of 3,15,422 registered voters in the district.

In Rangamati, long queues of voters were visible at different centres from the morning.

At the Shukrachhari Government Primary School centre, 31 percent of votes were cast by 12:00pm, while the figure



stood at 42 percent at the Hajachhari centre at the same time.

At 6:00pm, the office of the district returning officer said a total of 54.07 percent votes were cast across the district's 10 upazilas, excluding postal ballots.

Rangamati Superintendent of Police Muhammad Abdur Rakib said voting ended peacefully across the district, except for a few isolated allegations of fake voting.

In Khagrachhari, voting was held peacefully at 203 centres, with visibly high voter turnout at polling centres across Khagrachhari Sadar, Panchhari, Dighinala, Mahalchhari, Lakshmichhari, Matiranga, Manikchhari and Guimara

upazilas. Participation of female voters was also significant.

District Election Officer Md SM Shahadat Hossain said nearly 60 percent of the district's 5,54,414 registered voters cast their ballots.

To ensure security, members of the BGB, police, Rab, Ansar and VDP were deployed across all three districts, with additional measures taken at vulnerable centres. The administration said necessary materials and officials were present at all centres on time.

(Our Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachhari correspondents contributed to this report.)

After 56 years, women of South Rupsha vote

This Chandpur union sees women voters for first time since 1969

STAR REPORT

For the first time in 56 years, women from Rupsha South union under Faridganj upazila of Chandpur exercised their franchise in the 13th national election and referendum held yesterday.

According to locals, in 1969, women were locally directed not to cast votes. Since then, women residents of the union have not participated in elections, despite repeated encouragement from the Election Commission and local authorities, reports Prothom Alo.

After voting began yesterday morning, women were seen thronging polling centres across the union in good numbers, casting their votes spontaneously and with enthusiasm.

"I am feeling very happy to have voted for the first time in my life today," said Ayesha Begum, 70, at the Gridhkalindiya High School polling centre.

Asked why she had never voted before, Ayesha said, "There was a restriction [on voting by women]. After locals convinced us, we came to vote."

Nurjahan Begum, another resident, said she has been living in the area for 45 years since her marriage and has never voted during this time.

Explaining why she came to vote this time, Nurjahan said, "Everyone told us that since women can have jobs, go to the market and do everything, why can't you vote? Voting isn't haram in Islam, so there is no problem with it. So we came to vote today. Not participating in previous elections had been a mistake."

KM Lokman Hakim, presiding officer at the Gridhkalindiya High School centre, said there were 3,603 voters at the centre, including 1,811 men and 1,792 women. "Till 9:30am, a total of 401 voters had cast their franchise, including 159 women," he said.

A similar scene was witnessed at the Charmandari Shaheed Smriti Government Primary School

centre. However, presiding officer Abdus Samad said that as women voters had never voted before, many were largely unaware of the voting process.

The union has a total of 21,695 voters, including 10,299 women.

Recently, the Chandpur district administration took initiatives to organise meetings to raise awareness among women in the union and encourage them to vote. Local leaders, alems, imams, muezzins and common people participated in the meetings.

"Voting by women is not a crime according



to Islam. The then military administration's directive 56 years ago was misinterpreted locally, depriving women in this union of their voting rights all these years, which is unacceptable," said Nazmul Islam Sarkar, deputy commissioner and returning officer in Chandpur.

Visiting the Gridhkalindiya High School centre around 11:00am, Chandpur Superintendent of Police Rabiul Hasan said women in the union had been informed that there would be no problem if they came to vote.

"Realising that, women have come to vote. So far, there has been no untoward incident across the district," he added.

Queues, selfies

FROM PAGE 4

Because most centres lacked elevators, elderly voters and women faced difficulties. Ansar members were seen assisting them, and one pregnant woman was observed climbing to the third floor, having to pause at each level to rest.

Abul Kashem, a voter at Jatrabari Ideal School and College in Dhaka-5, said he cast his vote after many years, hoping for a big change in the election. "Earlier, other people cast our votes on our behalf. This time, I cast my own vote."

A female voter of Dhaka-5 rushed to the polling centre at Rose Garden High School in Dhalpur but could not enter because the voting time was over.

Speaking to The Daily Star without mentioning her name, she said she had gone to different polling centres to find her name on the voter list. "When I finally found my name and rushed to the correct polling centre, I discovered that the time was already up."

Expressing frustration that she missed entering the centre by only three minutes, she added, "It was my fault. I should have left home earlier to cast my vote."

Meanwhile, a relaxed atmosphere was observed at a roadside stall in Pallabi's C Block in Dhaka-16. Voters were seen chatting over tea, relieved that there was "no fighting or shoving".

Right next to the stall, fresh jilapris were being fried in a single pan and selling out instantly, with many voters returning home carrying bags of the sweets after casting their ballots.

In Dhaka-6, 90-year-old Monowara Begum arrived early with her daughter, stating she "could not sleep at night" out of excitement. The Laxmibazar resident cast her vote at St Gregory's High School and College.

Another Laxmibazar resident, Laila Akter Lipi, came to cast her vote despite battling a brain tumour for a long time. She said she last voted in 2008 and had been waiting for the opportunity to exercise her right again. "I feel very good to have gotten the chance after so many years. Please pray for me."

In Dhaka-15, a long queue of voters was seen at Shewrapara's Monipur School and College around 6:15am – even before polling activities gained full momentum.

According to several locals present at the scene,

many of those standing in line identified themselves as supporters of Jamaat-e-Islami. Witnesses said they had gathered shortly after the Fajr prayer, demonstrating early enthusiasm to cast their votes.

Jamaat Ameer Shafiqur Rahman, a candidate from this seat, cast his vote at the Manipur High School and College centre (Boys' Branch) at 8:30am.

Young voters were seen taking selfies and group photos in the centres after voting, prompting the Army and BGB to use megaphones to request people to return home and reduce congestion.

Throughout the day, a notable number of female police officers were deployed, playing an active role in managing the crowd and maintaining order. Their efforts were observed to be effective in keeping the voting process smooth and disciplined.

The overall environment reflected strong voter participation and heightened security arrangements.

While generally peaceful, a tense scene unfolded at Mirza Abbas Mohila College in Shahjahanpur. National Citizen Party candidate Nasiruddin Patwary and BNP candidate Mirza Abbas held separate press briefings where they traded barbs.

The duo's verbal tug-of-war and prickly relationship during the campaign season have left voters both troubled and entertained over the past month.

Patwary, chief coordinator of the NCP, claimed that voters were being intimidated by Abbas's men due to the party's rising popularity, alleging that BNP activists barred his polling agents from entering several centres.

He also alleged that the Awami League was backing the BNP, and "India was backing the Awami League", and therefore, the Awami League, India and BNP were collectively contesting the election against the Jamaat-led II-party alliance.

As he left the Mirza Abbas Mohila College centre, a group, mostly BNP supporters, chanted "Bhua bhua [fake]" aimed at him.

Later, at a separate press briefing in the same place, Abbas said the NCP candidate had failed to deploy agents in many centres as he had no supporters.

Results being 'withheld'

FROM PAGE 1

constituencies, and counting has been completed. But the returning officers concerned are not announcing the results. It is puzzling why they are keeping them pending.

"At one point, the [Election Commission] website suddenly showed the number of seats won by different parties. Then it disappeared. Our agents were made to wait for a long time."

"We hope to get the detailed information by tomorrow or the day after. The Election Commission has also assured that it will publish the results by February 13. We are waiting for that."

"If they do not, we will wait for a reasonable time," he said, questioning the "cat-and-mouse game" in some constituencies.

"Why would Dhaka-8, for instance, still remain pending? These do not reflect healthy political practices... We will consider these matters and inform the nation as much as we deem necessary so that such bad practices do not continue in the future."

The Jamaat leader said that in an election, not everyone wins.

"Some will win; some will lose. This is the beauty of democracy. There are certain political cultures in our country, and we are in favour of changing them."

"We have already said we will not create disputes

over minor issues, and we do not want to return to the old political culture. We want to practise positive politics."

Asked whether Jamaat and the II-party alliance fear any manipulation, Shafiqur said, "Many things have happened. But we do not want to comment on this right now."

"Someone will certainly be held accountable for this. For that, we need to know more and verify. If I make an unconfirmed statement before you [journalists], the responsibility will fall on me later. We do not want that."

Meanwhile, earlier at a press briefing at his main election office in Dhaka-15, the Jamaat ameer said his party would accept the results of the 13th parliamentary election, regardless of whether other parties do so.

"We believe that if voting continues the way it has so far and there is no major interference, we will accept the results. In Sha Allah, whether others accept them or not."

Replying to a question about Jamaat's expected performance in the polls, he said, "We believe the results may begin to take shape by around 11:00pm. It would not be appropriate for us to make any comment at this moment."

Speaking at another press briefing, he described Jamaat as "a party with a painful history". "Since its

inception, the party has been banned repeatedly, yet it has never stopped its activities."

Shafiqur also expressed hope that if Jamaat gets the opportunity to form the government, it would want all parties as partners.

"There was a lot of fear, panic, and propaganda that the election would not take place and that no one would be able to participate. Ultimately, the Election Commission and the people together ensured a good election."

"The credit does not belong as much to political parties as it does to those involved in election management and those who worked as guiding forces to make this election meaningful from different aspects."

Thanking voters for their participation, Shafiqur said, "There had been widespread panic surrounding the election. But despite everything, the election has been held, and there has been no major incident."

Regarding the possibility of victory or defeat in his own constituency, he said, "In society, mistakes can happen when people move together. The person who contested against me in this seat is also my colleague and associate. We met twice today [Thursday] as well. When we engage in such a contest, only one will win, and the other will accept it. That is normal."

Polls catch the eyes of global

FROM PAGE 2

put forward a manifesto focusing on reform, women's safety from harassment and clean politics, the party is not running a single female candidate, Guardian reported.

In an interview story with Tarique Rahman, Guardian reported the BNP leader is the main contender to be the next prime minister of Bangladesh and promised a new era of clean politics, including a "top down, no tolerance" approach to graft.

"One of the biggest geopolitical challenges facing the new government of Bangladesh will be rebuilding relations with its neighbour India," it said.

In a report, BBC said the new government in post-uprising Bangladesh will have to restore law and order or lead in economic recovery.

"It will also have to

determine the country's direction in a changed geopolitical world."

Furthermore, the new leadership will be tasked with implementing the state and social reforms that the people have repeatedly demanded, BBC reports.

News agency AP reported that the election could redefine the nation's future.

"Many voters hope the return to elections will restore law and order, protect civil liberties and bring accountable leadership. But there is also unease. Some fear political instability, the marginalisation of women and minorities, and the rise of Islamists in a secular country."

There is a broader consensus that Yunus' interim government steadied an economy

that had been in free fall, but many say it failed to restore security and protect human rights, and neglected the safety of religious minorities.

For years, Bangladesh stood out globally for being governed by female prime ministers – Khaleda Zia for two full terms and Hasina for four. It gave many women a sense of representation. That legacy, however, is under threat, it added.

CNN in its report titled "Gen Z won the revolution. The old guard is dominating the election" says that amid the absence of the Awami League, the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islam are back.

The new party, the National Citizen Party, has struggled to meaningfully muscle its way into Bangladesh's fractious and often violent political scene.

BNP reclaims Obaidul Quader

FROM PAGE 4

According to election affidavits, Fakhrul was among the wealthiest candidates in the district and has spent heavily on campaigning.

Expressing full confidence before the vote, Fakhrul said Noakhali-5 had been built as a BNP stronghold through the tireless efforts of Moudud, a former BNP law minister.

He alleged that Quader had held the seat for years by abusing power and muscle.

Following the political shift on August 5, 2024, Quader fled the country, Fakhrul added, allowing voters to cast their ballots freely in the 13th parliamentary election.

He said he expected a landslide victory with the sheaf of paddy symbol and hoped to present the seat as a gift to party Chairman Tarique Rahman.

A BNP supporter echoed this sentiment, saying,

"This seat belonged to Moudud Ahmed; we are fighting to bring it back this time."

Meanwhile, Jamaat also retains a strong organisational base in the constituency.

Its candidate Belayet has generated considerable discussion in political circles, particularly due to Jamaat's voting strength in Kabirhat and Companiganj.

Observers said Jamaat's growing influence pushed the contest towards either a three-way race or a direct BNP-Jamaat showdown, with a visible "wave" of support for the Jamaat candidate, especially in Kabirhat, shaking the foundations of Quader's former stronghold.

BNP leaders say the party revitalised its old vote bank to reclaim the seat and end Quader's long dominance.

Local analysts note that the opportunity for a genuinely free election after a long interval generated

significant enthusiasm among general voters.

In the election held under the interim government, voters were able to cast their ballots without fear after years of restraint.

Law enforcement agencies ensured strict security across the constituency, while voters said they prioritised both development and good governance in exercising their franchise.

Moudud was elected MP from Noakhali-5 in 1979 (BNP), 1991 (Jatiya Party) and 2001 (BNP), while Quader won in 1996, 2008, 2018 and 2024. Moudud's long political era ended with his death in 2021.

Harunur Rashid Azad, secretary of the district BNP and mayor of Noakhali municipality, claimed all six seats in Noakhali are BNP strongholds.

Describing Moudud as the party's late guardian, he had also expressed confidence that Moudud's successor in Noakhali-5, Fakhrul, would win by a huge margin, reclaiming the seat for the BNP.

Voting festive, peaceful

FROM PAGE 2

European Union and the Commonwealth reported strong voter participation and peaceful proceedings in yesterday's elections.

The European Union Observation Mission said it witnessed a lot of positive enthusiasm among voters till noon.

The mission deployed 200 observers nationwide to monitor the vote, marking the first full-fledged EU mission since the 2008 elections.

Ivars Ijabs, the mission's chief observer, said EUEOM maintained online contact with its observers stationed across Bangladesh, receiving regular updates on the opening of polling stations, voter turnout and the overall conduct of the election.

The mission will publish preliminary findings tomorrow and a final report within two months.

According to Ijabs, most polling stations opened on time and voting proceeded peacefully.

He described the election as an important opportunity for citizens to exercise their democratic rights.

"I think this is really a wonderful opportunity for Bangladeshi people, this time, to cast their vote in a really free, participatory, and competitive election," he said.

"This is really a big day for Bangladesh's democracy."

Meanwhile, the Commonwealth described the election as the largest democratic exercise of 2026, both within the Commonwealth and globally.

Nana Akufo-Addo, chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group, said his team monitored the entire process, from the opening of polling stations to the management of results.

For the first time, diaspora voters participated in the election from 122 countries.

"The inclusion of diaspora voters on this scale, alongside the simultaneous referendum on the constitutional reforms, is noteworthy and reflects a commitment to enhancing democratic processes," said Akufo-Addo.

The Commonwealth deployed observers to eight divisions two days before the vote to assess preparations and meet with local stakeholders. They will issue a preliminary report tomorrow.

According to the Chief Adviser's Office, at least 394 international observers and 197 foreign journalists were on the ground to monitor and cover the election and referendum.

Turnout 38.4%

FROM PAGE 4

At Kairail Kopa Government Primary School centre, near the mausoleum of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, turnout reached 22.43 percent by 2:00pm.

Meanwhile, 20.18 percent of votes were cast at Baghiar Ghat School and College centre by 2:30pm.

Several voters expressed cautious optimism outside polling stations.

Sanjit Kumar, 62, a resident of Ward No. 10 in Tungipara, told The Daily Star, "The election is being conducted in an orderly manner. Many people have come to vote. We want to elect someone who will continue development work and complete the unfinished projects."

Young voter Enjamul Haque Rasu echoed a broader yearning for change.

"We want an equitable, humane and justice-based Bangladesh. Over the past 17 years, we have seen how people's voting rights were undermined. This generation wants a Bangladesh where voting rights are ensured and democratic practices continue. I have come to vote with that expectation," he said.

WHEN ART BECOMES THE VOICE OF CRITIQUE

Cartoonists share hopes, grievances

“Everything is already so literal,” he explains, noting that the traditional “multiple layers” of satire are difficult to apply when reality is already a farce. Beyond this, he faces the suffocating culture of political labeling.

RAKSHANDA RAHMAN MISHA

During the July Uprising, Bangladeshi cartoonists played a vital role in dismantling the facade of authoritarianism. Under an oppressive regime, many artists faced the constant threat of imprisonment under the controversial Digital Security Act. Yet, they continued to speak out, using their pens to expose the corruption, absurdity, and injustice of the system. Their caricatures became a powerful tool of resistance, cutting through layers of fear and censorship to reveal truths that words alone often could not capture.

However, in the wake of the movement, a paradoxical silence has emerged. Despite the shift in the political landscape, political cartooning remains surprisingly limited, particularly regarding election-related issues. Some observers note that current cartoons often appear more as tools for party self-promotion



VISUAL: ANIKA TAH SIN HAFSA

creative expression and personal safety.

The dilemma of labeling

For Morshed Mishu, Cartoonist and Assistant Editor at UNMAD, the challenge is as much creative as it is physical. He describes a sense of “creative exhaustion” shaped by the reality of the political theatre itself. Mishu observes that the actions and statements of politicians have become so inherently absurd that they function as their own caricatures.

“Everything is already so literal,” he explains, noting that the traditional “multiple layers” of satire are difficult to apply when reality is already a farce. Beyond this, he faces the suffocating culture of political labeling. If he critiques the interim government, he is branded a fascist; if he pokes at the BNP, he is called pro-Jamaat; and if he critiques Jamaat, he is labeled anti-Islamic. This constant pigeonholing makes it difficult to maintain the objective, multi-angled perspective that defines a **political cartoonist**.

Structural hurdles

The psychological toll is equally heavy for Natasha Jahan of *The Business Standard*. She speaks of a profound emotional fatigue and a loss of hope in the post-uprising atmosphere. “I thought cartoons would grow, but that is no longer the case,” she says. The disappointment stems from seeing individuals she once respected change their stances as power dynamics shifted. This sense of being “let down” by the very people the movement sought to empower has created a stifling environment for artists who thrive on hope

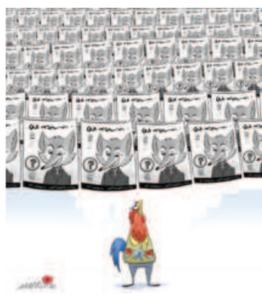
and accountability.

Zahidul Haque Apu, a freelance cartoonist and Senior Manager at Hoichoi Bangladesh, highlights a more structural issue: the lack of recognition. He suggests that many talented artists have stepped back because their contributions go unacknowledged. Unlike musicians or writers, cartoonists often lack a professional support system, leading to a drop in motivation. Furthermore, the pressure is often indirect. Apu recalls receiving “polite calls” questioning his work, such as his tribute to the late Abu Sayed. These “hints of threat” from anonymous sources create a pervasive culture of self-censorship.

The enduring power of the pen

Despite these constraints, the artists still find moments where their work captures the national mood. Mehedi Haque recalls his 2014 cartoon of the Chief Election Commissioner emerging from a ballot box like a genie from Aladdin’s lamp. Jahan points to her recent work involving a heroic tiger and the Jamaat Ameer, reflecting the complex shifts in political alliances.

Ultimately, the state of political cartooning in Bangladesh today reveals a sobering truth. While the formal barriers of the previous regime may have shifted, the psychological and social risks remain. We see more **self-censorship** than actual state-sanctioned threats, suggesting that the real battle for free expression is now being fought in the minds of the artists themselves. The question remains: can the craft survive in a climate where safety is never guaranteed?



Artworks by Mehedi Haque



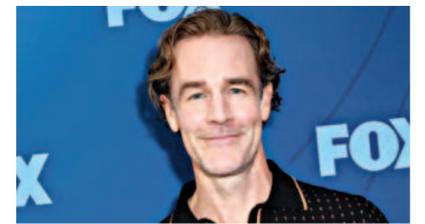
Artwork by Morshed Mishu

rather than critical examinations of the system. As we cross a historic election, we talk to some artists who convey their experiences.

The risk of the “most profitable game”

Mehedi Haque, Senior Cartoonist at *The Daily New Age* and Executive Editor of UNMAD, provides a candid look at the current dangers. Having drawn political cartoons for over 25 years, he describes this as the most challenging period he has ever faced. The risk, he explains, comes from the desperation of political players.

“Some parties that never imagined coming this close to power are desperate to win this most profitable game,” Haque notes. He points out that many current leaders lack “cultural literacy” and have little understanding of satire, leading to reactions that are often vulgar rather than legal. Working almost alone for long periods has heightened this sense of vulnerability. While his newspaper remains resilient against legal notices and threatening phone calls, the environment demands a constant, exhausting negotiation between



‘Dawson’s Creek’ star James Van Der Beek no more

James Van Der Beek, best known for his role as Dawson Leery in the 1990s teen drama *Dawson’s Creek*, has died at the age of 48 after battling cancer. His wife, Kimberly, announced on social media that he passed away peacefully, describing his final days as marked by “courage, faith, and grace”.

In 2024, the actor revealed he had been diagnosed with colorectal cancer following a routine colonoscopy. He continued to share updates about his treatment and health journey online.

A native of Connecticut, Van Der Beek rose to fame alongside Michelle Williams, Joshua Jackson and Katie Holmes. Beyond *Dawson’s Creek*, he appeared in over 60 film and television projects, including *Varsity Blues* and *The Rules of Attraction*. He is survived by his wife and six children.



Actor Tinu Karim passes away

Television actor Tinu Karim passed away on Thursday, February 12, at around 12:00pm in Barishal after suffering a heart attack, shortly after returning home from casting his vote in the national parliamentary election. His wife, Humayra Nowshin, confirmed.

According to colleagues, the actor had gone to a polling centre earlier in the day. After voting and returning home, he began to feel unwell and was rushed to hospital, where doctors declared him dead.

Earlier this year, Karim had returned home after a 40-day hospital stay that included ICU care and life support. Though he had recovered and been discharged in early January, he suddenly fell ill again at his village home.

Active in the industry for over two decades, Karim debuted on television in 2001 with *Shakkhor* and entered films with *Opekkha* in 2010. He also appeared in *Raat Jaga Phool* and *AltaBamu*.

He is survived by his wife and 11-year-old daughter.



Bubly elegantly poses after casting her vote



Three iconic sisters -- Shuchanda, Champa and Babita voted together



Outspoken Rukaiya Jahan Chamak after casting her vote



Apurba proudly flaunting his thumb



Imtiaz Barshon after voting

CELEBRITIES JOIN THE FESTIVITIES

‘Vote for Bangladesh’, said Ashfaque Nipun, an instrumental figure in speaking against the past authoritarian regime. It rang true, celebrities joined in droves, hoping to elect the candidates who they deem fit to run their constituency. It was smiles, elation and a quiet promise to do more for the country.



‘July-warrior’ Badhan after casting her vote



Ashfaque Nipun urged everyone to vote for Bangladesh



‘Joyodhoni’ famed Zohad brandishing a victory sign



Shajal reporting from the voting center

The people have given their verdict

All contestants must honour it with grace and dignity

As the nation awaits the final outcome of this historic election to confirm which political party or coalition will emerge victorious, we must reflect on the overall election environment. By and large, save for a few unfortunate incidents, the 13th parliamentary election has been conducted relatively peacefully, with a decent turnout in most centres.

The overall atmosphere was celebratory, with people spontaneously coming out to cast their votes. Women and men of all ages were seen at the polling centres. The elderly, people with disabilities, and young voters—everyone—participated enthusiastically. This indicates a hard-earned, long-overdue public trust in the election process and demonstrates people's excitement in exercising their vote, something they were deprived of in the last three elections.

In fact, many of the concerns that had surrounded the election were adequately allayed. There were apprehensions that there would be many incidents of violence leading to panic among the people, lowering the voter turnout. In fact, hours before voting began, various political actors, seemingly aligned with the Awami League, Jamaat-e-Islami, and BNP, used social media platforms to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the election, falsely or unconvincingly accuse rival parties of foul play, and discourage people from voting. There were a few isolated incidents of attempts at creating panic and ballot snatching, but these were very few and promptly prevented. In the end, voters refused to be deterred by false propaganda and were determined to exercise their democratic right.

With around 12.77 crore voters, almost half of them women, and 2,028 candidates and 50 political parties joining the race, this was an election with very high stakes. Consequently, a vast number of security personnel were employed to make sure that it took place smoothly. The number of polling centres were 42,779, with 21,506 considered "risky" due to close competition between the two major parties. About eight lakh election officials were engaged, and nearly 10 lakh security personnel were deployed to maintain tight security, including over one lakh army personnel and more than 1.86 lakh police officials, along with thousands from the air force, navy, BGB, coast guard, Ansar, Rab, and village police. Considering the fact that this election also included a referendum, the voting process was notably smooth and efficient.

The overall atmosphere was celebratory, with people spontaneously coming out to cast their votes. Women and men of all ages were seen at the polling centres. The elderly, people with disabilities, and young voters—everyone—participated enthusiastically.

The government and the Election Commission must be commended for efficiently managing the formidable logistics of organising this election while ensuring it was conducted peacefully and fairly. Despite the large number of polling centres and voting booths, the presence and sincerity of helpful volunteers and polling agents ensured the overall discipline and avoided long queues and crowding. The presence of police and army personnel gave voters confidence, enabling them to cast their votes freely. The prompt action by the army the night before the election, during which they arrested a number of individuals for attempts to tamper with the process, played a major role in deterring potential mischief-makers and alleviate any fears the voters may have had. The consistent role of the army chief in maintaining a position of advocacy for a free and fair election and helping to deliver one also deserves praise.

Finally, much of the credit for such a peaceful election goes to Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus who, despite having fallen short of some crucial public expectations during his tenure, has commendably overseen the delivery of a festive, free and fair election that will set the standard for future polls. This will undoubtedly be an important accomplishment of his legacy.

At the time of writing this editorial, vote counting has not concluded, and it is therefore not possible to comment definitively on the results. We congratulate whoever emerges victorious and urge the losing side to accept the verdict of the people with grace and dignity. Political parties, in general, also deserve appreciation for their relative restraint and cooperation during the election.

Going forward, we look forward to a parliament with an honest, pro-people ruling party and a strong, conscientious opposition that keeps the government accountable. We also expect the next government to be committed to upholding the basic rights and freedoms, especially freedom of the media. May this election usher in the new Bangladesh we have long dreamed of: a nation with a healthy, thriving democracy where all citizens will enjoy justice, equality, accountability, and peace.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



China's last emperor fall

On this day in 1912, Hsian-T'ung, the last emperor of China, was forced to abdicate following Sun Yat-sen's republican revolution. A provisional government was established in his place, ending 267 years of Manchu rule in China and 2,000 years of imperial rule.

A new Bangladesh demands new directions



Altaf Parvez is a researcher and political analyst.

ALTAF PARVEZ

Today, Bangladesh begins a new journey. After over 18 months since the mass uprising, the long-awaited election has finally been held, opening up the path for a democratic transition. After any election, it is natural that one party will form the government and another will be the opposition. The question for now is whether a large section of the voters have participated in the election, and whether the electoral process has been relatively free from external interference or disturbance. Going by initial estimates, the election has certainly passed the test.

While all our expectations from this pivotal moment may not have been fulfilled, we have, nevertheless, obtained a roadmap for moving forward. Bangladesh is soon going to have a parliament with members elected through a largely credible competition. Citizens are going to have a team of their choice at the helm of the state and as their political guardians. In the coming days, political authority and a healthy political environment must be restored at every level of society. Instead of reactionary YouTubers and social media influencers, elected representatives must be at the helm of things, both in parliament and outside.

A new national parliament is also a nod to the rebuilding of our fragile political institutions. Through their campaigns prior to the elections, political parties have already begun reorganising themselves. Those who could not take part in the election could, in time, also return through a process of reorganisation. In other words, Bangladesh's political reconstruction has begun anew.

Going forward, our primary expectation is that the new government will make parliament the central platform for all national decisions, be it political, economic, or social. Policy decisions must not be made at the Secretariat by bureaucrats, but by the elected representatives, and implemented through the executive branch. In this regard, we must stress the importance of empowering the local government, a vital but persistently ignored segment of the administration. Due to the lack of credible polls and support from the state, the union parishads, upazila parishads, zila parishads and other local government bodies have long been weakened, undermining grassroots democracy and service delivery, an imbalance the new government must fix. Our farmers are suffering. Local communities are struggling under the double digit inflation. Poverty has risen. Past MPs showed little interest in developing or empowering the local government

bodies, which has only obstructed the country's overall development. At this moment of national renewal, we hope the new government will sufficiently empower and activate the local government.

Another area demanding immediate attention is the reconstruction of the police force. It still remains structurally and morally weak. The public does not want police to return to its pre-July uprising state. The resentment caused by the police during the uprising must be remembered objectively by the incoming government. People want a police force that is both corruption-free and free from political influence.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

The interim government, beyond changing uniforms, could do little to achieve that goal, so it is crucial that the new parliament and government focus on reorganising the force to make it truly professional.

Bangladesh cannot go back to the culture of enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killing or custodial torture of political opponents and ideological dissenters. Intelligence agencies, too, must therefore be transformed. Many within these agencies will likely seek favour with the newly elected government as soon as it is formed. Perhaps the government's first test will be whether it considers such overtures strictly through a professional lens. If freed from partisan influences, police and intelligence agencies can certainly perform much better, and they should.

Another urgent task is a national initiative for social reconciliation. Both Jamaat-e-Islami and BNP mentioned this in their manifestos. The interim government also initially said it would

all political groups, as well as all socioreligious categories.

As part of its mandate and July National Charter obligations, the new government will likely soon start undertaking various reform initiatives. The sustainability of these initiatives will, however, depend on durable political unity, proper planning and enforcement, and reconciliation-oriented outcomes. Well-planned initiatives can also help manage the supervisory impulses of certain influential countries and also open the way for substantial domestic and foreign investment. In this connection, a foremost task will be to construct a non-discriminatory economy. The youth are waiting eagerly. They want change, and elected leaders must deliver that.

It is worth recalling that, as in Bangladesh, mass uprisings in Sri Lanka and Nepal were also largely driven by economic injustice. In our case, economic injustice has two

this anarchic atmosphere and establish a rights-based order in the country. During the interim period, mob violence has inflicted heavy damage on our social cohesion. Women and minority communities have especially suffered immense physical, psychological and material harm. In this climate, the seeds of armed extremism have been increasingly visible. Some political actors have even fuelled these tendencies, exploiting existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

To address this, three simultaneous actions are necessary: i) a pro-poor economic reform, giving priority to marginalised districts and upazilas in resource distribution; ii) ensuring democratic practice at every level of administration, from the centre down to the union level; iii) firm policing against any form of extremism. Without these measures, securing a peaceful future will be difficult. Let these be the foundation on which the new parliament operates.

Finally, an election that felt real



Afia Jahin is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

AFIA JAHIN

On January 7, 2024, when most people around me had abstained from voting in the Awami League's staged national election, I had swallowed self-judgement and stamped the first ballot of my life. It was the first election I was witnessing since becoming a journalist, and I wanted to experience the process of voting and write about it. "When will I ever get the chance again?" I had thought. At that time, all signs indicated that every future election held under the Awami League government would be more restrictive than the one before it. By the next election, I had assumed, the autocratic regime would not even bother to put up an act of being "democratic."

As Prof Ali Riaz had estimated in an op-ed centring on the 2024 election, "After January 7, theoretically, the government will have two options: 1) to scale back and return to past practices; or 2) to double down in its

persecution and attempt to rule with an iron fist." Awami League took the latter course. But, only months later, the party's firm iron fist made it all the simpler for Bangladesh to make a choice of its own.

More than a decade of repression had been knocked off our backs, and we found ourselves in an inevitable vacuum.

In the 18 months since then, politicians new and old tried their best to seem democratic, journalists had to unlearn one type of self-censorship and learn a few new ones, and citizens could only trust that the interim government would do a decent job of 1) ensuring justice for the victims and survivors of the July mass uprising and 2) delivering a credible, participatory national election.

As of writing this article, votes are being counted and we are now hours away from learning the outcome. And while there have been reports and

flashbacks of riggings, irregularities, already cast votes, and even a crude bomb blast, the country's 13th parliamentary election has concluded in a largely positive way.

In comparison to the scenes of deserted polling centres in 2024, almost all polling centres this time saw steady, even overwhelming, flows of enthusiastic voters. Across the country, we noted a large turnout of the youngest of young and the frailest of elderly voters. This was also the first time many young adults voted, to the point where a lot of them had not even learnt the basics of the electoral process itself until this election. What was only rhetoric, even propaganda, for so many years became reality: voters cast their ballots in a festive electoral environment.

Yet, I hesitate to assign finality to that sentiment. All my life, I have only seen polls that were marred by conflict, violence, and autocratic opacity. And while this is the most participatory election we have had in a long time, no matter which way the results go, we cannot be expected to shed the fear of facing another government that tries to erase our individualities and deny us our rights.

When we think of July-August 2024 now, we subconsciously choose to think only of August 5. We generally shudder away from the

flashbacks of protesters being shot at with clear intent to kill. We often shake off reminders of innocent, battered, killed bodies being laid over the footstep of a rickshaw or shoved off the side of a police vehicle; of law enforcers' vehicles reversing directly into and over a crowd of protesters. Most of us understandably don't go back to the footage of Abu Sayeed's killing—which has been meticulously analysed as evidence by open-source investigators globally—for fear of feeling shocked and numbed again.

After casting his own vote on Thursday morning, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus said, "Through today's process, people have rejected the past. Whatever nightmarish past existed, we have completely discarded it."

In speaking of a new Bangladesh, Yunus likely meant one that is democratic in practice. However, we need to be careful about which aspects of the old Bangladesh we choose to reject and discard. Our collective trauma surrounding the July uprising is one that we must overcome, not avoid acknowledging altogether. And we must overcome it by sparing no opportunity of speaking truth to power and challenging any move or declaration that toes the line drawn 18 months ago in the blood of our martyrs.

From boycott to balance: Rethinking the opposition's role in parliament



Asif Bin Ali
is an Atlanta-based geopolitical analyst and a doctoral fellow at Georgia State University. He can be reached at abinal2@gsu.edu.

ASIF BIN ALI

On Thursday, Bangladeshis got another chance to practise parliamentary democracy through a national election that appeared more participatory and competitive than those in 2014, 2018, and 2024. While the opportunity has been precious, it has also forced us to ask ourselves an awkward question: not just what kind of government, but what kind of opposition are we prepared to accept this time?

Since the 1990 mass uprising, Bangladesh has formally followed a British-style parliamentary model. On paper, this system assumes two pillars: a government that governs, and an opposition that questions, scrutinises, and holds power to account. Parliamentary democracy is simply unimaginable without both.

In theory, the country has always had an opposition. In practice, that opposition has rarely behaved as if parliament is its main arena. We invest a great deal of energy in criticising whoever is in power, often because of very real abuses of authority and corruption. But the record of opposition politics since the 1990s has also been quite problematic. The story is not only about authoritarian governments, but also about opposition sides that repeatedly walked away from the one institution designed to restrain those governments—sometimes of its own volition, sometimes because of pressures coming from the side in power.

Since 1991, both the major parties have treated parliament as almost optional. The Awami League, in opposition during the BNP governments, boycotted around 30 percent of the sitting days during the fifth parliament (1991-1995) and 60 percent of the sitting days during the seventh parliament (2001-2006). Later, when BNP became the main opposition in the ninth parliament (2009-2014), its MPs were absent on 83.38 percent of the sitting days. Overall, studies show that over roughly two decades, opposition parties in the country skipped about half of all parliamentary sittings, regardless of who was in power.

So when we talk about a “culture of boycott,” it is not a metaphor. It is a measurable pattern. Both the Awami League and BNP have treated parliament like a stage that can be deserted whenever negotiations stall, criminal cases are filed, or street pressure seems more useful

competitive.

In 1996 (February), 2014, 2018, and 2024, the pattern was similar: an incumbent party used constitutional formalities to stage an election with minimal competition, while opposition parties responded with total boycott. Each side played both roles at different moments: sometimes as the overbearing government, sometimes as the sulking boycotter.

“sessions,” and Jatiya Sangsad became a symbolic backdrop.

This habit has several consequences. First, it leaves legislative power almost entirely in the hands of the ruling party. With supermajorities generated by the first-past-the-post system, governments already enjoy the mathematical ability to pass any law they like. Second, it helps ruling parties shift political argument from policy to

has signalled that if his party wins, it will prefer to form a government alone. Jamaat, in contrast, has floated the ideas of a national government or broader power sharing. These are tactical disagreements about cabinet formation and coalition management, but beneath them lies a deeper reluctance to accept opposition as a legitimate, long-term role.

The debate will become even sharper if the proposed package of constitutional reforms goes ahead. If the referendum, held on the same day as the election, approves the creation of an upper house, the opposition will no longer be confined to just one chamber; it will have institutional footholds in both. On paper, this could create stronger checks and balances. In reality, if the boycott culture continues, the country will simply end up with two half-empty houses instead of one. New architecture without new behaviour will not rescue parliamentary democracy.

At the minimum, a democratic opposition in Bangladesh needs three shifts.

First, an opposition that shows up. That sounds banal, yet the statistics say it would be a radical change. Turning up to sessions, serving on committees, engaging in budget debates and Q&A sessions is not charity. It is the job. Walkouts and boycotts might still have a place, but as rare, targeted tools with clear demands and time limits, not as a default operating system.

Second, an opposition that does its homework. Criticising “corruption” or “misrule” is easy. Drafting an alternative budget, dissecting the fine print of a bill, or proposing concrete amendments to a policy requires staff, research, and discipline. A serious opposition should behave like a government in waiting, not a permanent protest group. That includes presenting alternative policies inside parliament, not just in talk shows and rallies.

Third, an opposition that defends rules even when it hurts. Real commitment to democracy is tested when your rivals are under threat. That means speaking up against extrajudicial killings, media intimidation, or attacks on minorities even when the victims are seen as “enemy voters.” If opposition parties only care about rights when their own activists are targeted, they simply rehearse the same selective morality that they condemn in governments.

Without these changes, any new parliament will slowly reproduce the old pathologies. Governments, no matter how popular at birth, will drift towards arrogance once they realise that there is no institutional cost to ignoring parliament. Opposition parties will again discover that they gain more attention from street violence than from committee hearings. The cycle of boycott, crackdown and sham election will reassert itself.



‘Studies show that over roughly two decades, opposition parties in Bangladesh skipped about half of all parliamentary sittings, regardless of who was in power.’

FILE PHOTO: STAR

than parliamentary debate. This is the first layer of the problem. The second layer is how these boycotts interact with elections themselves.

Bangladesh has already experienced “elections without voters” more than once. In February 1996, disputes over a by-election and demands for a caretaker government led all major opposition parties to boycott, turnout fell to about 21 percent, and the BNP government that emerged survived only 12 days before a caretaker administration was installed. In January 2014, the roles reversed: the Awami League stayed in office without a caretaker system, while BNP and most other opposition parties stayed out of the race. That election saw 153 of 300 seats go uncontested and effectively decided before polling day, with the Awami League winning 127 by default. International observers largely stayed away, and serious research now treats the 2014 polls as neither free nor genuinely

The aftermath of the 2014 election created a new distortion. With BNP and Jamaat out of the race, Jatiya Party stepped into the vacuum as the “main opposition” in parliament. At the same time, its leaders also joined the Awami League-led cabinet and took ministerial portfolios. Analysts and even party documents have described this as a “domesticated opposition”—formally in the opposition benches but functionally a part of the ruling arrangement.

So the country moved from one extreme to another: from boycotting opposition to ornamental opposition.

If we look at the period between 1990 and 2014, excluding the military-backed caretaker interludes, one pattern runs through every parliament. Opposition parties were far more active in press conferences, hartals, road marches, and talk shows than in committees and floor debates. Hartals became the real

security. Once politics moves to the street, governments can frame every confrontation as a law and order problem, rather than a democratic disagreement. Third, boycott politics normalises the idea that parliament is optional. MPs are elected on taxpayers’ money, supported by public allowances, yet they feel no shame in skipping hundreds of sittings.

Now the political script is changing again. Sheikh Hasina was forced out of power following the uprising in 2024. The Awami League was barred from the just-held 13th parliamentary election. A transitional government oversaw a vote that many describe as the most open in a decade and a half. Whoever wins will form the government; whoever loses will sit in opposition.

The temptation will be strong to dust off the old playbook. Already, we hear hints of zero-sum thinking. Tarique Rahman

Can we finally confront gendered violence seriously?



MIND THE GAP

Barrister Noshin Nawal
is a columnist for The Daily Star. She can be reached at nawalnoshin@gmail.com.

NOSHIN NAWAL

On January 29, Bangladesh’s interim government finally pushed through two headline-grabbing ordinances: one on preventing sexual harassment in workplaces and educational institutions, and another on preventing domestic violence. On paper, both are designed to do what our legal system has historically struggled to do with conviction: move women’s safety from the “please deal with quietly” folder to the “the state has intervened” folder. That is the good news. However, Bangladesh has historically lacked outcomes. So, a measured assessment must do two things at once. We need to read what has changed in the reported black-letter features and ask whether the architecture is strong enough to withstand implementation avoidance.

Let us begin with the sexual harassment ordinance. The most significant shift is symbolic and legal simultaneously as we deal with codification. For years, the closest thing Bangladesh had to a comprehensive anti-harassment framework was judicial guidelines issued by the High Court Division in *Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) v. Government of Bangladesh* (2009), treated as binding until replaced by legislation. The guidelines required complaint committees, confidentiality, timelines, and institutional responsibility, and they became the backbone for many workplace policies, at least on letterheads. The ordinance appears to take that idea and attempt to make it legally mandatory. It reportedly defines sexual harassment broadly, covering physical, verbal, mental, suggestive and digital space behaviour, explicitly recognising harassment through online and information technology channels. That matters because modern harassment often happens in the virtual world, and the old legal ecosystem forced survivors to either squeeze the conduct into outdated penal provisions or accept that



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

digital humiliation is somehow not “real” harm.

Institutionally, the ordinance’s committee model mirrors the High Court guidelines’ vision, with sharper operational detail. Complaints can be made verbally, in writing, or online, and investigations must be completed within ninety days of receipt. There is also an emphasis on survivor-centric measures, including confidentiality, safety, mental support, and protection from retaliation. If these safeguards are embedded as enforceable obligations, they address a chronic weakness of earlier practice: committees existing in name only, while complainants are pressured to withdraw, transfer, or “settle.” Another improvement, if implemented, would extend coverage beyond neat, formal institutions.

already moved, at least partially, towards workplace protection through labour reforms. The Bangladesh Labour Act (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025, reportedly introduced a framework for committees addressing discrimination, violence, and harassment, aligned with International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 190 (C190). If two separate committee systems now exist (one under labour law and one under the new harassment ordinance), employers and institutions may respond with the classic bureaucratic defence: jurisdiction ping pong. The law will need crystal clear coordination rules so complaints do not get bounced between committees. Additionally, committee-based models can be transformative, but in Bangladesh, they can

also become polite theatre: meetings happen, minutes are written, and everyone waits for the complainant to get tired. The ordinance reportedly includes provisions addressing false complaints. Safeguards against malicious use are legitimate, but if drafted broadly, they can discourage women in a culture that already punishes women for speaking.

Now, the domestic violence ordinance. This one is explicitly framed as replacing the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010. That is a big claim because the 2010 act was itself a landmark, primarily because it acknowledged domestic violence as a distinct harm and built civil protection remedies into the legal system rather than relying solely on general criminal law. What seems improved in the new ordinance, based on official briefings reported in the press, is breadth and speed. The definition is reportedly broadened to cover physical and psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and economic abuse. Economic abuse is where domestic control in Bangladesh often lives—confiscated earnings, blocked access to money, coercive dowry pressure disguised as “family needs”, and deliberate financial dependence. Naming it is a legal gateway to remedies.

The ordinance also appears to tighten timelines. A preliminary investigation must begin within seven days of receiving a complaint in the prescribed form, with a report submitted within thirty days. Compared to the lived pace of domestic violence proceedings, where urgency is routinely downgraded into adjournments, these deadlines signal intent. Moreover, the ordinance reportedly strengthens protective orders, including temporary orders restricting contact or proximity with the perpetrator, followed by permanent orders after investigation. If courts use temporary protection orders early, that can be the difference between prevention and postmortem justice. There is also a more overt survivor support package being described: safe shelter, medical care, legal aid, rehabilitation, counselling, and even a dedicated fund with monitoring committees at the district and upazila level. This is the part that separates just a “law” from a safety system. Many survivors do not remain in violent homes because they love chaos; they remain because there is nowhere else to go, no money, no social support, and no faith that the state will protect them if they leave.

The biggest problem is the choice to pass these laws as ordinances. Ordinances can be necessary in transitional periods, but they also carry fragility: they are vulnerable to political turnover, legislative replacement, and selective enforcement. The durability question matters because violence and harassment prevention is not a six-month pilot; it is a generational recalibration of power. Furthermore, shelters, counselling, emergency protection, and local committees require trained officers, budgets, monitoring, and accountability. Bangladesh’s protection regime has repeatedly suffered from the gap between statutory promises and service delivery. Funds and committees help, but only if they are insulated from patronage and treated as core governance, not charity.

Likewise, survivors’ experience with police and courts is also crucial. Even a perfect ordinance will collide with familiar realities: pressure to “settle”, stigma, unsafe reporting environments, and the risk of retaliation. The new harassment ordinance’s emphasis on confidentiality and anti-retaliation is encouraging. The domestic violence ordinance’s fast-track investigation timelines are also promising. But unless the system builds consequences for non-compliance by institutions and officials, the deadlines may become aspirational. Lastly, harassment frameworks often lean heavily on disciplinary outcomes (warning, suspension, dismissal), while survivors may also want criminal accountability depending on severity. Domestic violence frameworks often centre protection orders, while survivors may also need parallel criminal processes for assault, marital rape-related conduct, dowry violence, or child abuse.

The ordinances will be judged not only by what they create but by how they interact with existing penal and family law pathways without forcing survivors into procedural mazes. The honest verdict, right now, is this: both ordinances look like an attempt to convert long-standing demands and judicial guidance into more structured, time-bound, survivor-oriented systems, with explicit recognition of digital harassment and economic abuse. That is real progress. At the same time, Bangladesh’s history suggests that the hardest part will not be passing the ordinances. It will be making sure that every committee is not a paper committee, every deadline is not a decorative deadline.

LAW OPINION

Mandatory Pre-litigation Mediation in Civil Disputes

Countries such as Italy have notably benefited from this mechanism. Italy has developed its own model, but it does not include all types of civil litigation within its scope. This is because mandatory pre-litigation mediation is not a 'one-size-fits-all' solution, and certain categories of civil disputes are better suited to it due to their specific features.

ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

As an emerging and prevalent trend, mandatory pre-litigation mediation has been introduced in many parts of the world including the USA, Italy, Australia, Germany, France and Norway. Following the trend and as a solution to case backlog, Bangladesh has recently adopted mandatory pre-suit mediation for some selected civil suits. This article will examine the justification for adopting this mechanism for selected civil suits in Bangladesh, addressing the yet unresolved question whether it should be extended to all other categories of civil litigation, either initially or in the future.

Mandatory pre-litigation mediation (MPM) is a legal requirement that the parties to a dispute must undertake to settle their issue in a setting with a neutral third-party mediator before initiating court proceedings. This concept is quite similar to that of 'Pre-action Protocol' in Australia and 'Pre-action Obligation' in England and Wales, where the parties should consider whether ADR could facilitate the resolution of their dispute prior to formal legal proceedings. In Bangladesh, the parties are required to first apply to the concerned Government Legal Aid Office for the settlement of their dispute before proceeding to the court. A judicial officer designated as a 'Legal Aid Officer' or a 'Special Mediator', typically a retired judge, serves as a third-party mediator in this process. If the mediation succeeds, the settlement attains the status of a court decree. If mediation fails, only then the parties are allowed to file a suit in court demonstrating that mediation was attempted but unsuccessful. Bangladesh has made

this model of mediation applicable to some selected categories of civil suits including 'Suit for Partition', 'Pre-emption under State Acquisition and Tenancy Act' and 'Pre-emption under Non-agricultural Tenancy Act'.

Indeed, mandatory pre-litigation mediation resolves the disputes permanently, even before going to the court. In doing so, it acts as a filtering flask, preventing unusual influx of litigation and reducing case backlog. It is a quick and cost-effective means of dispute resolution. Furthermore, mediation prior to litigation preserves the relationship between disputants, increasing the likelihood of an amicable resolution.

Countries such as Italy have notably benefited from this mechanism. Italy has developed its own model, but it does not include all types of civil litigations within its scope. This is because mandatory pre-litigation mediation is not a 'one-size-fits-all' solution and certain categories of civil disputes are better suited for pre-litigation mediation due to their specific features.

Similarly, in Australia, only the Federal Court under Civil Dispute Resolution Act 2011, requires the parties to take some 'genuine steps' to resolve their issues before initiating court proceedings. In France too, mediation is mandatory before litigation only in cases involving small claims and neighborhood disputes. Given the unique characteristics of different types of civil litigation and following the examples of Italy, Australia and France, Bangladesh has wisely limited its application to some selected categories of civil suits, as an initial test case, rather than extending it to all sorts of civil litigations.

Categories of civil suits involving

complicated questions of title and legal rights, are less amenable to mediation. Therefore, bringing all civil disputes, irrespective of their characteristics, under the ambit of mandatory pre-litigation mediation at the initial stage would not have been an appropriate approach.

The partition and the pre-emption suits have been rightly selected due to its mediation-friendly feature, as disputants are most often family members or close relatives. If the partition disputes can be resolved before litigation, relationship will be potentially preserved, paving the way for an amicable resolution. In an adversarial legal system like Bangladesh, litigation frequently damages relationships, which in turn hinders the possibility of amicable settlement.

Mandatory pre-litigation mediation seeks to compel an effort to resolve disputes through mediation. While the attempt is obligatory, settlement remains completely voluntary. It may at best temporarily suspend access to the courts (not justice), as

disputants are not compelled to reach an agreement. Therefore, mandatory mediation, mandated before initiating court proceedings in Bangladesh, is fully aligned with the constitution and international instruments, as it does not obstruct right to access to justice, provided that specific time constraints are adhered to.

The Italian model of mandatory pre-litigation mediation has also proven effective in combating case-overloads. Italy introduced a form of mandatory mediation in 2010 and re-visited it in 2013 incorporating inputs from other stakeholders to make it more compatible with its legal, cultural and constitutional context. After a decade of trial and error, Italy has included some other categories of civil litigation in the mandatory pre-litigation mediation ambit under the *Cartabia Reform* of 2023. Similarly, Bangladesh should now proceed through the phases of experimentation and trials. After

a reasonable period of testing, Bangladesh should engage all relevant stakeholders to assess the effectiveness or shortcomings of the MPM and then decide whether it should extend the mechanism to other categories of civil disputes to make it more effective, compatible with its own people and jurisdiction.

In conclusion, Bangladesh has correctly adopted mandatory pre-litigation mediation for selected civil suits. After an extensive experimentation and revision of the model, it may be extended to other categories of civil litigation subject to its demonstrated effectiveness and success in reducing case backlog.

The writer is Judge, Bangladesh Judicial Service, and currently studying at the University of Sydney, Australia.



RIGHTS WATCH

The peril of domestic workers in Bangladesh

MEHELIKA ANAN RAMISHA

A shocking news story took Bangladesh by storm in October 2024 when thirteen-year-old Kolpana was rescued from her employer's house. Her rescue years later ignited a media frenzy with the general public expressing shock and horror at the extent of her injuries. The young girl's harrowing account of abuse and isolation sheds light on a particularly vulnerable demographic of the workforce of domestic workers. In that light, a question arises as to why a culture of vulnerability exists around them, and perhaps an analysis of our legal system can shed light on the answer.

Despite the substantial workforce, our law remains surprisingly silent regarding the rights of these workers. The Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy (2015) was an attempt to rectify this situation. However, the Policy failed to clearly define necessary terms or create a feasible system, and as a result, a High Court Division bench even went as far as to deem it 'vague' and 'incomplete'.

The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 only last year included 'domestic workers' within the definition of workers. In cases of serious abuse, e.g., torture or death, the Penal Code, 1860 and other special criminal laws may be applied. However, these laws do not address certain situations such as discrimination or occupational safety and health violations. It is not enough that domestic workers simply be included in existing Acts, but rather, I would argue that separate legislation is needed. This is primarily due to the social nature of domestic work and the vulnerable backgrounds of the workers.

Furthermore, the large imbalance in power between the worker and the employer is unlike most others. A report by Bangladeshi Ovibashi Mohila Sramik Association (BOMSA) states that about 80 percent of the permanent domestic helpers are minor girl children. Fueled by hopes of a better future, these children are sent to homes within urban regions, but the cruel reality is that these children are denied education, access to adequate healthcare and other basic rights. Adult domestic workers are in similar precarious situations in that they often lack education, and employers often capitalise on their vulnerabilities. In fact, full-time



PHOTO: THE NEW YORK TIMES

housemaids are said to work anywhere from 8 hours up to 15 hours a day. From age to economical background, these workers are at a disadvantage and require a specific sort of legal protection.

When it comes to such specific legislation, Bangladesh may look to other countries for inspiration or guidance. For example, the Philippines, similar to Bangladesh, relies heavily on domestic work, but in contrast, the Philippines has advanced miles ahead in terms of rights for domestic workers. The Domestic Workers Act is a landmark piece of labour and social legislation that extends labour rights, benefits, and protection to an estimated 1.9 million domestic workers in the Philippines. It covers a range of jobs including persons performing general household work, it sets the minimum age of employment to fifteen, and mandates that the employer shall safeguard the health and safety of the domestic worker in accordance with law in addition to the rights and privileges accorded to workers including the right to education and training, access to outside communication and the guarantee

of privacy among others. Brazil is another interesting case as a 2013 Constitutional Amendment allowed domestic workers all fundamental labour rights guaranteed to a typical employee, such as extra pay for night-shift work, family bonuses, severance pay, indemnity fund system (FGTS), and occupational accident insurance, a large stride forward in terms of social protection legislation.

The fabric of society is built upon its citizens, and as such, the law cannot remain blind to the needs and rights of a particularly vulnerable and vast swathe. Simply roping in such a large, unseen group of people into a law not intended for them is not an adequate solution to uphold Bangladesh's constitutional and international obligations. Instead, new specific legislation is necessary, and the lawmakers must focus on social protection and creating an equitable legal framework.

The writer is official contributor at the Law & Our Rights, The Daily Star, and student of Department of Law, University of Dhaka.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Int'l day for the prevention of violent extremism

Violent extremism undermines peace and security, human rights and sustainable development. It is a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition. It is neither new nor exclusive to any region, nationality or system of belief. Nevertheless, in recent years, terrorist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al-Qaida and others have shaped our image of violent extremism and the debate on how to address this threat. These groups' message of religious, cultural, and social intolerance has had drastic consequences for many regions of the world. Holding territory and using social media for real-time communication of their atrocious crimes, they seek to challenge our shared values of peace, justice and human dignity.

The spread of violent extremism has further aggravated an already unprecedented humanitarian crisis which surpasses the boundaries of any one region. Millions of people have fled the territory controlled by terrorist and violent extremist groups. Migratory flows have increased both away, from, and towards the conflict zones, involving those seeking safety and those lured into the conflict as foreign terrorist fighters, further destabilizing the regions concerned.

Nothing can justify violent extremism; however, we must also acknowledge that it does not arise in a vacuum. Narratives

of grievance, actual or perceived injustice, promised empowerment and sweeping change become attractive where human rights are being violated, good governance is being ignored and aspirations are being crushed.

In its resolution 77/243, the General Assembly decided to declare 12 February the International Day for the Prevention of Violent Extremism as and when Conducive to Terrorism, in order to raise awareness of the threats linked to violent extremism, as and when conducive to terrorism, and to enhance international cooperation in this regard.

The General Assembly emphasised in this context the primary responsibility of Member States and their respective national institutions in countering terrorism, and underlined the important role of intergovernmental organisations, civil society, academia, religious leaders and the media in countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism. The resolution reaffirmed that terrorism and violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism cannot and should not be associated with any one religion, nationality, civilization or ethnic group.

Compiled by Law Desk (SOURCE: UN.ORG)



NEWS

Eight people die in, around polling centres

FROM PAGE 16

Contacted, Khulna Metropolitan Police Commissioner Zahidul Hasan said, "We did not see any pushing in the CCTV footage [of the altercation]."

In Kishoreganj, a local resident reportedly suffered a heart attack while he was running away from law enforcers who were dispersing a crowd near a polling station in Bhairab upazila.

The incident took place near Aganagar Dakkhinpara Govt Primary School polling centre around 11:00am.

Razzak Miah, 55, a resident of Dakkhinpara village, was sitting outside a house adjacent to the polling centre after casting his vote, said locals.

Suddenly, a group of law enforcers arrived, began dispersing a crowd that formed outside the centre and charged truncheons at one point, they added.

"Razzak was running and suddenly collapsed on the ground. He was later taken to Bhairab Upazila Health Complex," said witness Khairul Islam.

There, physician Kishore Kumar Dhar pronounced Razzak dead on arrival. "No injury mark was found on his body. It appears the man died of a heart attack."

Contacted, Bhairab Upazila Nirbahi Officer KM Mamunur Rashid said, "We heard that Razzak was suffering from heart disease. He might have suffered a heart attack in panic when the law enforcers arrived."

In Manikganj, an elderly man died after falling ill while waiting in line to cast his vote in Shibbaloy upazila.

The incident took place at the Mahadevpur Govt Primary School polling centre around 11:20am, confirmed Presiding Officer Faysal Ahmed.

Babu Mia, 70, a van driver and a resident of Mahadevpur area,

arrived at the centre in the morning, collected his voter slip and stood in line to cast his vote.

"He suddenly fell ill, fell on the ground and died on the spot," said Abdul Mannan, a witness.

In Brahmanbaria, a polling officer suffered a stroke and died while on duty in Sarail upazila, said a physician.

The incident took place at the Syed Sirazul Islam Auditorium polling centre around 7:45am.

Mozahidul Islam, 48, a madrasa teacher, was assigned as the polling officer at the centre.

Presiding Officer Shamim Al Mamun said Mozahidul Islam fell ill soon after the voting began. "At one point, he fell unconscious and collapsed on the ground."

Later, he was taken to the Sarail Upazila Health Complex, where the on-duty doctor declared him dead, he added.

Mozahidul suffered a stroke and passed away before he was brought to the health complex, said Medical Officer Dr Solaiman.

In Chattogram, a voter fell ill and died while standing in line at a polling centre in the city.

The incident took place around 7:30am at the Kazir Dewri Govt Boys' Primary School polling centre under the Chattogram-9 constituency, confirmed Presiding Officer Faruk Ahmed.

Md Monu Mia, 57, worked as a security guard at a shop in Kazir Dewri area.

Witnesses said that shortly after voting began around 7:30am, Monu Mia fell ill while standing in line. He was rushed to a nearby private hospital, where doctors declared him dead.

Monu Mia's son, Md Shakil, said his father could not be saved despite being taken to hospital quickly.

In Mymensingh, a presiding officer and a member of the village police died while on duty at two separate polling centres in Haluaghat upazila.

Rezaul Karim, 48, was serving as an assistant presiding officer at the Darabanni Govt Primary School centre under the Mymensingh-1 (Haluaghat-Dhobaura) constituency.

He fell ill just before polling began and was rushed to the local upazila health complex, where doctors declared him dead, confirmed Returning Officer Saifur Rahman.

Ibrahim Sheikh, 50, a member of the village police, was serving at the Amtail Govt Primary School polling centre under the Mymensingh-1 seat.

He suddenly fell ill around 3:30pm while on duty. He was rushed to Haluaghat Upazila Health Complex, where doctors declared him dead.

The matter was confirmed in a condolence message issued by the district returning officer.

In Dhaka, a voter died after suddenly falling ill inside a polling centre in Jatrabari.

The incident occurred around 8:30am at Agradoot Vidyayiketan High School polling centre, confirmed Jatrabari Police Station Sub-Inspector Shatarupa Kund.

Abu Sayeed Sarkar, 53, was taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, where doctors declared him dead around 10:30am.

His son, Farhan Ishraq said his father collapsed on the staircase while heading up to the booth. He was rushed to hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

Farhan added that his father had a history of heart disease and had previously suffered a stroke.

[Our correspondents from Khulna, Manikganj, Kishoreganj, Brahmanbaria, Chattogram, and Mymensingh contributed to the report.]



Protesters wave flags and hold placards as they march during the visit of Israel's President Isaac Herzog in Melbourne, Australia, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Polls offers new chapters

FROM PAGE 16

The Indian Ocean is one of the busiest maritime corridors on the earth, carrying the lifeblood of global commerce and energy, including more than 80 percent of global seaborne oil trade, the US representative said.

Safeguarding these sea lanes through enhanced naval cooperation with partners and allies will only serve to counter China's growing influence and limit its malign behaviour in the region, he said.

Preserving America's military fortitude in the region will deter Chinese coercion, prevent piracy, and ensure the free flow of American and

world trade, he added.

Huizenga said the US India trade deal sets India's tariff rate at 18 percent, one of the lowest regionally. Moreover, Delhi has agreed to buy more American energy.

"I look forward to increasing cooperation, co-production, and investment, especially under the new framework negotiated by the president."

At the hearing, Assistant Secretary State for South and Central Asia, S Paul Kapoor, said a hostile power dominating South Asia could exert coercive leverage over the world economy and that the US must prevent this from happening.

He pointed out three broad categories: defence cooperation, targeted investment, and diplomacy. "Defence cooperation includes military sales and transfers, co-development of systems, and platforms and bilateral and multilateral exercises."

Huizenga said the US has resolved longstanding issues with India in trade relationship as evidenced by the renewed 10-year US India defence framework agreement.

"Targeted investment [in South Asia] can provide these states with high quality transparent non-coercive support for critical infrastructure like ports."

72 injured in 14 incidents

FROM PAGE 16

In Gangni, around 10:00am, a clash broke out at the Bhatpara Government Primary School polling centre over alleged obstruction to voters. Jamaat claimed that six of its activists and supporters were injured.

In Meherpur Sadar upazila, another clash occurred at Chandpur Government Primary School polling centre.

In Rajshahi, a Jamaat activist was allegedly hacked by a BNP supporter around 3:30pm near the Mendipara polling centre.

"Police and army personnel went to the spot and brought the situation under control," said Bagmara Police Station OC Saidul Alam.

In Khulna-5, a voter named Sanjoy Saha was allegedly assaulted for casting his vote for BNP. He is undergoing treatment at Phultala Upazila Health Complex.

Phultala Police Station OC Mostafa Kamal said police could not identify the attackers and asked the victim to file a complaint.

In Chattogram-13 (Anwara-Karnaphuli), a supporter of the Bangladesh Islamic Front candidate was allegedly beaten up outside the Gundip Government Primary School polling centre, police said.

In Chattogram's Patiya, three supporters of Jamaat candidate Mohammad Faridul Alam were allegedly assaulted by BNP supporters around 11:30am outside the Purba

Ratanpur Government Primary School polling centre.

Lt Md Tahmid, who was on duty in the area, said army personnel acted swiftly and dispersed those involved. "Voting was not affected."

In Munshiganj Sadar upazila, the army detained five people and recovered a firearm and several crude bombs following an explosion at Makhati Gurucharan High School polling centre, said Captain Charles, commander of the Gazaria army camp.

Sadar Police Station OC Mominul Islam said the clash occurred between supporters of BNP candidate Md Kamruzzaman and independent candidate Md Mohiuddin.

In Brahmanbaria's Sarail, voting was suspended for 10 minutes at Alinagar Government Primary School polling centre following a clash between supporters of independent candidate Rumeen Farhana and BNP alliance contender Maulana Junayed Al Habib, said the local OC.

Voting resumed after law enforcers restored order, he added.

In Rajshahi-5, a scuffle broke out between supporters of BNP nominee Nazrul Islam Mondol and independent candidate Rezaul Karim in front of Naopara Government Primary School polling centre in Durgapur upazila. No serious injuries were reported.

In Feni, at least seven people were injured in election-related violence.

According to locals and police,

a supporter of Jamaat-led 11-party alliance candidate Mujibur Rahman, chief of Amar Bangladesh Party, was allegedly assaulted by BNP men at a polling centre in Lemua of Sadar upazila.

Anam Abdur Rahim, chief election agent of Manju, was injured in a separate attack allegedly by BNP activists in Dharmapur union.

Four to five supporters of Manju were also beaten up in Panchgachhia, while a local Jamaat leader was critically injured in Shorshodi union -- all allegedly by BNP supporters.

In Gopalganj, three people -- two Ansar members and a child -- were injured in a crude bomb explosion at the Reshma International School polling centre in Nichupara. The injured are Ansar members Sukanto Majumdar and Jamal Molla, and 13-year-old Amena Khanum.

In Jashore, BNP supporters allegedly attacked and injured two Jamaat men -- Abu Hena, 25, and Abdul Mannaf, 33 -- outside Talbaria Government Primary School polling centre.

In Jhalakathi, police detained four people after Jamaat candidate Fayzul Huq alleged that he was attacked by BNP supporters at Adakhola Secondary School polling centre in Rajapur upazila.

Huq claimed that three people, including his bodyguard, were injured. BNP candidate Rafiqul Islam Jamal denied the allegation, saying Huq's actions at the centre led to the scuffle.

At Narsingdi-1

FROM PAGE 16

were seen capturing the moment on their mobile phones.

Voters said such gestures added to the festive mood of the election and sent a positive message about political tolerance.

Shirin Akhter said, "We stand for a people's uprising. We have struggled together in movements before; there is no personal conflict among us."

Khairul Kabir Khokon, president of Narsingdi district BNP, said, "If any of my activists get into trouble with others, inform me immediately and I will take action. Elections are a festival -- let me know quickly if there are any problems."

Md Ibrahim Bhuiyan said voting was taking place in a festive spirit.

"Beyond being candidates, the three of us are good neighbours. We have competition, but no hostility. Whether we win or lose, we all win. We live side by side in the same community," he added.

Observers said such public displays of courtesy could help foster a culture of democratic coexistence in the constituency.

Russia pounds Ukraine

FROM PAGE 16

while Moscow has pressed on with a battlefield offensive and attacks on Ukrainian cities.

"Each such strike is a blow to peace efforts aimed at ending the war. Russia must be forced to take diplomacy seriously and de-escalate," Sybiha wrote on X.

FROM PAGE 16
centre in Siddhirganj after voting, while Jasim cast his ballot at a polling station in Mahmudpur, Fatullah.

Although they now live with their families in rented accommodation at Jatrabari and Manikganj in Dhaka, they remain registered voters in Narayanganj.

They said they spent around Tk 200 each to travel and vote, describing the cost as worthwhile.

Polling officials assisted them in casting their ballots. The men said they were able to vote for their preferred candidates without "trouble or confusion".

"Today's voting felt different compared to previous years. As citizens of the country, we also want to cast our votes. It gives us a different kind of joy,"

said Monir.

He added that returning to Narayanganj allowed him to reconnect with friends and acquaintances.

"It felt like the festive joy of Eid," he said.

Jewel said he was inspired to vote after noticing large crowds heading to their home districts by train earlier this week. "Hearing their enthusiasm, I decided that I must vote too," he said.

Jasim echoed the sentiment. "Many people climbed onto the roof of the train because they couldn't find seats. Everyone was happily going to vote. I also came to cast my vote. I am happy that I could vote peacefully," he said.

Beyond voting, the trio voiced expectations from the incoming government, particularly regarding

support for people with disabilities.

"We are people with disabilities. We want our children to be able to study properly, and their tuition fees should be waived. We want to be freed from begging -- that is our hope," Jasim said.

Monir noted that they currently receive Tk 850 per month as a disability allowance.

"This amount doesn't even cover a month's tea expenses. Whoever comes to power should consider this issue. The allowance should be determined based on how much a person actually needs to live each month," he said.

After speaking to reporters, the three men were assisted by a local woman into a battery-run rickshaw and began their journey back home.

10 jailed, nine detained

FROM PAGE 1

In a separate incident at the Bagahata polling centre in the upazila, law enforcers detained seven teenagers for alleged suspicious behaviour. "As they are minors, bonds were taken from their guardians, and they were released after voting ended," the UNO added.

In the same district's Nabiganj upazila, a mobile court sentenced a UK expatriate to five days' imprisonment for tearing a ballot paper and creating disorder at a polling centre, said UNO Md Rahul Amin.

In Jhenaidah-2, a teenage boy was detained for attempting to cast a fake vote at Sonatampur Government Primary School polling centre in Harinakundu upazila, said Syedzadi Mahbuba Manjur Mouna, assistant commissioner of the upazila administration.

In Tangail-3, a man was sentenced to six months' imprisonment and fined Tk 5,000 for snatching ballot papers at Sarabari Government Primary School polling centre in Ghatail upazila, said the centre's Assistant Presiding Officer Abu Sayeed.

In Kishoreganj, a mobile court sentenced a youth to two years' imprisonment and fined Tk 10,000 for casting fake votes at Piplakandi High School centre in Hossainpur upazila, said judicial magistrate Swagat Soumya.

In Shariatpur-2, a man was detained for attempting to cast a fake vote at Naria Biharil Government High School polling centre in Naria upazila, said the centre's Presiding Officer SM Masud Kabir.

In Gazipur-4, a mobile court sentenced four people to two years' imprisonment each for provoking a

chase and counter chase between supporters of two candidates at Kapasia Bhawal Chandpur centre, said Gazipur Senior Judicial Magistrate Md Alamgir Hossain.

In Gazipur-3, an assistant presiding officer and two polling agents were withdrawn from duty on allegations of vote-rigging around 11:00am at the women's polling station of Sreepur Pilot Government High School, said Assistant Returning Officer Sajeeb Ahmed.

In Rangamati, a youth was detained for attempting to cast a fake vote at RTM Government Primary School centre in Kawkhali upazila, said Sohel Molla, the police in charge of the polling centre.

(Our correspondents from the respective districts contributed to the report.)

Yunus thanks the nation

FROM PAGE 1

Through exercising their constitutional rights, the citizens have played an active role in determining the country's future, the chief adviser added.

Prof Yunus said, "I extend special thanks to the Election Commission, the law enforcement agencies, the armed forces, the administration, observer teams, media personnel, and all officers and staff involved in the voting process."

It has been possible to complete this massive democratic event due to their dedication and hard work, he added.

"I call upon political parties and candidates to uphold democratic decency, tolerance, and mutual respect even after the final results are announced. Differences of opinion will exist, but in the national interest, we must remain united," the chief adviser said.

He said that Bangladesh has once again proven that the people are the source of all power.

"We will move forward collectively toward building an accountable, inclusive, and justice-based state," he added.

He further said, "This election is a moment of great joy and celebration for us. Through it, an unprecedented journey of a new Bangladesh has begun."

Prof Yunus said that this election

was the most peaceful and festive in the country's history, adding, "If this continuity can be maintained, our democracy will reach the pinnacle of excellence."

"Let's work together in this journey to strengthen democracy," he said.

Earlier, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus yesterday morning described the election and referendum as a moment of national joy and renewal.

"This is a day of great joy. Today is the birthday of a new Bangladesh. We will celebrate this birthday throughout the day," he told reporters after casting his vote at 10:26am at Gulshan Model High School and College.

"Through today's process, people have rejected the past. Whatever nightmarish past existed, we have completely discarded it. From today, at every step, we have gained the opportunity to build a new Bangladesh," he said.

"Voting for a candidate is important, but the referendum is very important. The whole of Bangladesh will change," he added.

"I feel very happy. This is a day of great joy for me. It is a day of great joy for everyone in Bangladesh. A day of liberation. The end of our nightmares and the beginning of new dreams, that is what today's process is for," Prof Yunus said.

activists thronged the street outside the office, celebrating the BNP's imminent election victory.

Unofficial results showed Tarique was on course to win both Dhaka-17 and Bogura-6 with the sheaf of paddy symbol. The polling centres he visited included Adamjee Cantonment School and College, and centres in Mohakhali, Panthapath, Bhashantek, Manik Mia Avenue, Dhammondi 27 and Suhrawardy Udyan areas.

Asked about his party's priorities if it wins, Tarique said improving the law and order situation would be the top priority so that people across the country feel safe. He also expressed hope for a stable and beautiful future with everyone together.

Tarique cast his vote at Gulshan Model High School and College, centre number 65 in the capital, around 9:40am, along with his wife Zubaida Rahman and daughter Zaima Rahman, who voted for the first time.

Speaking to reporters after voting, he said people in Bangladesh had been waiting for such a day for more than a decade and expressed hope that voters would be able to exercise their franchise freely to begin a new democratic journey for the country.

Referring to reports of irregularities and "unwanted incidents", Tarique said attempts had been made to mislead voters, which he said were unacceptable and could create a negative perception about those involved. However, he noted that law enforcement agencies had taken strict steps to control the situation following

incidents reported from different parts of the country on Wednesday night, which he found encouraging.

He stressed that higher voter turnout could help resist any conspiracy. "If people come out and use their rights, if more voters take part, then all kinds of conspiracies can be stopped," he said, urging voters as well as party leaders and activists to remain at polling centres until the end of voting.

"From what I have seen in Dhaka city, it seems that people are going to cast their votes with great enthusiasm," he said after visiting several polling centres in the capital, adding that public participation could prevent irregularities. He also said he was "firmly optimistic" about both voter turnout and his party's victory.

Meanwhile, after voting ended, BNP Election Steering Committee spokesperson Mahdi Amin said at a press briefing at the party's Gulshan election office that voter turnout was lower due to "misleading activities" by a political rival.

"There is a clear and huge difference between BNP and the rival political party. To resist that difference was the main purpose behind the violation of the code of conduct since last night," he said.

"That is why a hateful attempt was made to threaten voters and discourage them from coming to the polling centres. If these unfortunate incidents had not happened, voter turnout might have been higher," he added.

21 drown in Nile boat sinking in Sudan

AFP, Khartoum

At least 21 people drowned when a boat sank in the Nile River in northern Sudan, according to the local state government and eyewitnesses interviewed by AFP.

River Nile State said yesterday that 21 bodies had been recovered after the accident, listed their names and warned that some passengers were still missing.

The boat was crossing the river between the villages of Tayba al-Khawad and Deim al-Qarai, according to the local government's statement.

The statement did not explain the cause of the accident.

Eyewitnesses told AFP the boat was carrying 30 people. The Sudanese Doctors Network said in a statement that six of the boat's passengers survived.



The group said the incident exposes "the fragility of river transport and the absence of basic safety requirements, as well as the complete absence of local authorities and civil defence rescue teams in the early hours of the incident".

Many Sudanese rely on river transport via single-engine boats captained by solo operators. The country's infrastructure has been collapsing due to a war that has been ongoing for nearly three years.

The war has divided the country between the army and their enemy, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, with road closures and a severe deterioration in public services and medical and educational infrastructure.

A massive fire at a displacement camp in Sudan killed one child and left hundreds of people homeless after they had already been forced to flee the fighting ravaging the country.

The "catastrophic" fire broke out on Monday at Al-Omda camp near the city of Tawila in North Darfur, according to Abu Bakr Haroun, deputy head of the camp's management committee. He said the fire killed a three-year-old child, injured 13 other people, destroyed 548 homes and killed many animals.



US President Donald Trump hands a pen to a coal miner after signing an executive order directing the military to purchase electricity from coal-fired power plants, during a 'Champion of Coal' event at the White House in Washington, DC, on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

No 'definitive' deal with Netanyahu

Trump insists US talks with Iran to continue

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump said after talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday they reached no "definitive" agreement on how to move forward with Iran but he insisted negotiations with Tehran would continue to see if a deal can be achieved.

Netanyahu, who had been expected to press Trump to widen diplomacy with Iran beyond its nuclear program to include limits on its missile arsenal, stressed that Israel's security interests must be taken into account but offered no

Two leaders meeting for 4th time in nearly 13 months

Netanyahu urges wider US-Iran talks beyond nuke issues

sign that the president made the commitments he sought.

In their seventh meeting since Trump returned to office last year, Netanyahu - whose visit was more muted than usual and closed to the press - was looking to influence the next round of US discussions with Iran following nuclear negotiations held in Oman last Friday.

The two leaders spoke behind closed doors for more than two and a half hours in what Trump



described as a "very good meeting" but said no major decisions were made and stopped short of publicly accepting Netanyahu's entreaties.

Trump has threatened strikes on Iran if no agreement is reached, while Tehran has vowed to retaliate, stoking fears of a wider war as the US amasses forces in the Middle East. He has repeatedly voiced support for a secure Israel, a longstanding US ally and arch-foe of Iran.

In media interviews on Tuesday, Trump reiterated his blunt warning to Iran, while saying he believes Tehran wants a deal.

"There was nothing definitive reached other than I insisted that negotiations with Iran continue to see whether or not a Deal can be consummated," Trump said in a social media post after the meeting with Netanyahu. "If it can, I let the Prime Minister know that will be a preference."

"If it cannot, we will just have to see what the outcome will be," Trump added, noting that the last time Iran decided against an agreement the US struck its nuclear sites last June.

Trump told Fox Business in an interview broadcast on Tuesday that a good deal with Iran would mean "no nuclear weapons, no missiles," without elaborating. He also told Axios he was considering sending a second aircraft carrier strike group as part of a major US buildup near Iran.

Israel fears that the US might pursue a narrow nuclear deal that does not include restrictions on Iran's ballistic missile program or an end to Iranian support for armed proxies such as Hamas and Hezbollah, according to people familiar with the matter. Israeli officials have urged the US not to trust Iran's promises.

Militants kill 5 police in attack in NW Pakistan

REUTERS, Dera Ismail Khan

Militants killed five police officers in northwest Pakistan on Wednesday, police said, as the South Asian nation grapples with a rising wave of violence.

Police said they came under attack upon their return from an operation against militants on the outskirts of the city of Dera Ismail Khan.

The militants, who were hiding in a forest, opened fire on the police patrols, a police statement said. It said the police killed four of the militants in a retaliatory attack.

No one claimed responsibility for the attack.

The city sits on the edge of lawless Waziristan district along the Afghan border, which has long been home to Islamist militants, mainly local Taliban, also known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.

Militant violence has been on the rise since the TTP revoked a ceasefire with Islamabad in late 2022.

A suicide bombing killed over 30 people at a mosque in Islamabad on Friday.

Chinese President Xi Jinping sent a message of condolences to Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari over the deadly explosion in Islamabad.

US-CHINA THREATS EU vows swift reforms to meet challenge

AFP, Brussels

EU leaders yesterday vowed to act boldly to bolster Europe's economy faced with twin threats from China and the United States, as they huddled in a Belgian castle to bridge differences on the path ahead.

It is a challenge that has long dogged the European Union, but has gained greater urgency because of geopolitical shocks, intensified global competition and an economy that lags behind bigger powers.

Leaders share a common diagnosis that Europe's moribund economy needs a kickstart -- but they are far from agreed on the cure.

Paris and Berlin have publicly diverged on France's push to favour EU companies and for more joint debt -- although French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz were keen to present a united front yesterday.

"We share this sense of urgency that our Europe must act very clearly" in the face of "very strong pressure", such as unfair competition from China and US tariffs, Macron said.

"We want to make this European Union faster. We want to make it better," Merz said, adding: "I am pleased Emmanuel Macron and I are almost always in agreement on these matters."

India to buy 114 Rafale jets from Dassault

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's Defence Acquisition Council yesterday cleared an initial proposal to buy 114 Rafale fighter jets from France's Dassault Aviation for 3.25 trillion rupees (\$280.4 billion), local media reported.

The air force's fighter squadron strength has shrunk to 29 in recent months, well below the approved number of 42. Its workhorse MiG 21 was retired in September and other early variants of the MiG-29, the Anglo-French Jaguar and the French Mirage 2000, are also set to fly off into the sunset in the coming years.

New Delhi has long relied on importing machinery and weapons for its armed forces, but a recent push by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has helped boost indigenous manufacturing.

For the Indian Air Force, the era of domestic manufacturing began in the 1980s but was fruitful only in the last decade when the Tejas fighter jet was introduced to replace Soviet-era MiG 21s.

Hindustan Aeronautics has nearly 180 of the advanced Mk-1A variants on order domestically, but has yet to begin deliveries due to engine supply chain issues at GE Aerospace.

Heightened tensions with its neighbours have required India's military to modernise. The proposal paves the way for commercial and technical details of the deal to be discussed between the two countries, after a visit by French President Emmanuel Macron to India.

India has boosted military hardware imports from the US, France, and Israel. Macron is set to visit India on February 17. Modi's government has also liberalised laws to ease private investments in domestic defence manufacturing.



EPSTEIN ASSOCIATES US lawmakers accuse Bondi of concealing names

REUTERS, Washington

A Republican US lawmaker on Wednesday accused Attorney General Pam Bondi of concealing the names of powerful associates of the late financier and convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein as she faced questions about the Justice Department's handling of investigative files in a charged hearing before a House of Representatives panel.

Representative Thomas Massie, a Republican from Kentucky, who helped lead the effort to require the files' release, accused the Justice Department of a "massive failure" to comply with the law as he questioned why billionaire Leslie Wexner's name was redacted in an FBI document listing potential co-conspirators in the sex trafficking investigation into Epstein.

Bondi said Wexner's name appeared numerous times in other files the department released and that the DOJ unredacted his name on the document "within 40 minutes" of Massie spotting it.

"Forty minutes of me catching you red-handed," Massie replied. Bondi had a series of other heated confrontations with members of the House Judiciary Committee who expressed frustration with the amount of Epstein material the department has redacted and withheld.

The Justice Department released what it called a final tranche of more than 3 million pages of documents late last month, drawing renewed attention to wealthy and powerful individuals who maintained ties with Epstein even after his conviction for soliciting prostitution from a minor.



Demonstrators shield behind a banner reading 'Labour reform kills my freedom' as riot police fire water cannon during a union-led protest against labour reform in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

UK couple held in Iran 'caught' in geopolitical tensions: son

AFP, London

The son of a British couple held in Iran said Wednesday his parents were "caught in the middle" of geopolitical tensions as he urged the British government to act on their case.

Joe Bennett -- whose mum Lindsay Foreman and stepdad Craig Foreman have been held in Iran since January last year -- said "very difficult" UK-Iran relations and other current events were complicating their situation.

But he hit out at what the family sees as British inaction, calling the lack of recent contact with them by Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper and Prime Minister Keir Starmer "alarming".

"It's very difficult," he told AFP outside the UK parliament, after meeting lawmakers to discuss his parents' plight.

Imran left with 15pc vision in right eye

Pakistan's top court orders medical review

AGENCIES

A court-appointed lawyer has claimed that jailed former prime minister Imran Khan has been left with just 15 percent vision in his right eye after authorities allegedly ignored his complaints for three months, adding another layer of contention over his imprisonment.

Barrister Salman Salfar, appointed by the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SCP) as amicus curiae (friend of the court), conducted a two-hour interview with Khan on February 10 and inspected his detention facility before submitting a detailed seven-page report to the court on Wednesday.

The report paints a troubling picture of the 73-year-old's deteriorating health and prolonged isolation, since he was imprisoned in August 2023 on dozens of charges, reports Al Jazeera online.

It says Khan suffered rapid and substantial vision loss over the past three months while in custody under former jail superintendent Abdul Ghafoor Anjum, who was transferred in mid-January.

Despite repeated complaints of persistent

blurred and hazy vision, the report states that "no action was taken by the jail authorities to address these complaints".

"He stated that he subsequently suffered a sudden and complete loss of vision in his right eye," Salfar wrote.

A medical report dated February 6, 2026, diagnosed the condition as "right central retinal vein occlusion," Salfar noted.

An ophthalmologist from a leading government hospital in Islamabad was eventually consulted and confirmed the diagnosis, a blood clot that can cause severe retinal damage.

Salfar observed that the former premier was "visibly perturbed and deeply distressed," with watery eyes requiring tissues throughout their meeting.

The report warns that "any further delay poses a serious risk to the petitioner's well-being" and recommends an immediate independent examination by expert ophthalmologists, including Khan's personal physicians. "The issue of Imran's health is most important," Chief Justice Yahya Afridi observed, adding that "intervention was necessary."



Community members place flowers at a memorial during a candlelight vigil for victims of the mass shooting at Tumbler Ridge Secondary School, held Wednesday night in the small town of Tumbler Ridge, British Columbia, Canada. The suspect in the shooting was an 18-year-old woman with mental health issues who killed her mother and stepbrother before attacking her former school, police said.

PHOTO: AFP

Risk of Nipah spread low Says WHO after cases in India, Bangladesh

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organization (WHO) has said the risk of the deadly Nipah virus spreading was low after three cases of infection were recently confirmed in India and Bangladesh.

Nipah, which spreads from animals to humans, has no vaccine and a fatality rate ranging from 40 to 75 percent, according to the UN health body.

"In the past few weeks, three cases of Nipah – two in India and one in Bangladesh – made headlines and caused concern about a wider outbreak," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a press conference in Geneva on Wednesday. WHO assessed the risk of spread of Nipah virus regionally and globally and found it low, he added.

Two cases of Nipah were confirmed last month in India's West Bengal state while one patient died in Bangladesh last week after contracting the virus.

"The two outbreaks were not related, although both occurred along the India-Bangladesh border, and share some of the same ecological and cultural conditions, as well as populations of the species of fruit bat that are known to be the natural reservoir of Nipah virus," Tedros said.

Nipah was first identified in 1998 after it spread among pig farmers in Malaysia.

In India, the first Nipah outbreak was reported in West Bengal in 2001.

In 2018, at least 17 people died from Nipah in Kerala, and in 2023, two people died from the virus in the same southern Indian state.

GREENLAND DISPUTE

US allies pledge to step up within Nato

Sweden to send fighter jets to patrol around the island

AGENCIES

US allies in Nato yesterday said they believed the crisis over Greenland had passed after the launch of a mission in the Arctic – and looked to press on with bolstering Europe's role in the alliance.

President Donald Trump's threats against Denmark's autonomous Arctic territory last month plunged the 76-year-old transatlantic alliance into its deepest crisis in years, before he abruptly backed off.

As part of a package to assuage Trump – who based his demands for the island on an alleged threat by Russia and China – Nato announced Wednesday the start of an Arctic Sentry mission to increase security in the region.

Dutch Defence Minister Ruben Brekelmans said he was "fully confident that this will also meet the concerns of the United States" at a meeting with counterparts from the 32-nation alliance in Brussels.

But while Europe breathed a sigh of relief about the apparent passing of that storm, the Greenland crisis has only reinforced for many the urgent need for Europe to take a greater role in Nato and its own defence in the face of the menace from Russia.

That is the message being sent by the Trump administration as well: that Europe needs to step up as Washington pivots to focus on other challenges such as China, reports AFP.

US deputy defence minister Elbridge Colby said that allies were making strides towards a situation where it is "Europe that leads the conventional defense of Nato" rather than traditionally relying on US military might.

"I think we have a really strong basis for working together in partnership," he said at the alliance's Brussels headquarters. "Kind of a 3.0 NATO that's based on a partnership rather than dependency."

Meanwhile, Sweden will patrol around Iceland and Greenland with Gripen fighter jets as part of Arctic Sentry mission, it said

yesterday.

"This strengthens deterrence, protects our common interests, and contributes to stability in a region that is crucial for Europe and transatlantic cooperation," Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said in a statement.

"Sweden will initially contribute to Arctic Sentry with JAS 39 Gripen aircraft in the area around Iceland and Greenland," he said.

To make good on plans for Europe to play a bigger role, Nato needs to make strides on fulfilling the pledge made at its summit last year for countries to massively ramp up defence spending.

Military budgets have already increased since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and Trump has spurred on that trend.

"The good news is that the billions are coming in," said Nato boss Mark Rutte.

Rutte however insisted that he believed the United States would continue to play a central role in defending Europe.

"I predict that longer term, you will see, of course, the nuclear umbrella as the ultimate guarantor of our security here in Europe and Canada, but also a strong conventional presence of the US here in Europe," he said.

In a concrete sign of Europe taking more responsibility within Nato, the alliance this week announced the United States was handing two senior regional command positions to Britain and Italy.

The move was heralded by diplomats as a sign of increased "burden-sharing" within the alliance in action.

French Defence Minister Catherine Vautrin referred to a demand several months back from Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth that Europeans must be able to ensure their own security.

"Well, we are going to do it, we have started to do it," she said.

The next crucial staging post will be the Nato summit in Ankara this July when allies will have to convince Trump that they are already doing enough.



A truck lies on its side after strong winds from Storm Nils near Leucate, southwestern France, yesterday. Gales of 162km/h (100mph) were reported near France's south-west coast, and Alpine ski resorts in the east closed because of the high risk of avalanche, including La Plagne.

PHOTO: AFP

India farmers protest US trade deal

AFP, New Delhi

Farmers rallied across India yesterday to oppose a trade deal with Washington which reduces tariffs on US goods, warning that it would hurt Indian agriculture and endanger livelihoods.

Farmer unions have called the deal announced last week a "total surrender" to American agricultural giants, despite assurances from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government.

Waving flags and carrying banners, farmers and trade union members rallied in several cities, with minor scuffles with police reported in a few locations.

According to images shared by organisers, several thousand people took to the streets. Main opposition leader Rahul Gandhi said he stood with the "farmers and with their struggle".

"Farmers are apprehensive that trade agreements will strike a blow to their livelihood," he said in a social media post.

Under the terms of the trade deal, India will "eliminate or reduce tariffs on all US industrial goods" and other food and agricultural products.

N Korea's Kim entrenches daughter as likely heir: Seoul

AFP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has entrenched his daughter as heir apparent ahead of a landmark party conference, a South Korean lawmaker said yesterday after a briefing from Seoul's main intelligence agency.

The Kim family has ruled North Korea with an iron grip for decades, and a cult of personality surrounding their "Paektu bloodline" dominates daily life in the isolated country.

Kim's teenage daughter Ju Ae has long been seen as the next in line, a perception stoked by a string of recent high-profile outings.

South Korea's National Intelligence Service said Ju Ae has now been clearly "designated as a successor", lawmaker Lee Seong-kweon said after a parliamentary briefing with the spy agency.

The assessment was made "taking into account a range of circumstances – including her increasingly prominent public presence at official events", he told reporters.

S'pore to establish nat'l council to set AI direction: PM

AFP, Singapore

Singapore will establish a national council on artificial intelligence to provide "strategic direction" on the use of the new technology, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong announced yesterday.

Speaking in parliament to unveil this year's national budget, Wong said AI is "advancing at a remarkable speed", with immense potential to raise productivity and unlock new discoveries.

While AI has caused concerns about misinformation and jobs being displaced, Wong said the city-state must confront the technology and make it serve the country's needs.

He urged Singapore to move beyond "individual pilots and isolated experiments" and scale up the use of AI at the national level and across industries.

"Fear cannot be Singapore's response. If we allow uncertainty to paralyse us, we will fall behind in a world that is moving rapidly ahead," he said. "We must act with clarity and resolve," said Wong, who is also the finance minister.

Constitutional 'coup' under way Says Zimbabwe opposition

AFP, Harare

Leading Zimbabwe opposition figures accused the government Wednesday of a constitutional "coup" after the cabinet approved amendments that would allow President Emmerson Mnangagwa to extend his term in office.

Sweeping changes to the constitution accepted by the cabinet Tuesday include extending the presidential term to seven years and follow a decision by the ruling Zanu-PF that Mnangagwa should stay in office for at least two years after his term ends in 2028.

Other provisions scrap general presidential elections, giving parliament the power to choose the president. The amendments are to be presented to parliament, which is weighted in favour of the Zanu-PF, but the opposition insists they also need to be put to a national referendum.

"The process that is currently happening in Zimbabwe is a coup by the incumbent to extend his term of office against the will of the people," opposition politician Job Sikhala told AFP.

Ballots, bills, and the life we are building

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

For most young people, the upcoming election is not about hope. Hope is abstract, cheap, and endlessly recyclable. What this generation would vote for, some eagerly, some reluctantly, some for the first time, is accountability. Not the cinematic kind, not the post-election press conference version, but the everyday, measurable kind that shows up in pay slips, rent receipts, offer letters, and resignation emails. The kind that answers a very basic question: will life after this election be materially different for those trying to build it from scratch?

With the election days away, young people are not speculating about who will win as much as they are preparing a checklist of what must follow. For a generation that has timed its education, careers, relocations, and risks around uncertainty, this election represents a pivot, because it creates an opening for long-delayed reforms. The expectation is simple and uncompromising, as governance must now translate into opportunity.

For years, the idea of a good future has been narrowly defined. Respectability has been synonymous with security, and security has been almost exclusively associated with government employment. Entire career paths have been socially downgraded in the process. Private sector jobs, entrepreneurship, creative work, research, and skilled technical roles have all been treated as secondary options and acceptable detours until something more stable comes along. This has distorted not only aspirations but policy priorities.

A post-election government is expected to correct this imbalance by actively nurturing a diversified job market where dignity is not monopolised by the public sector. That means policies that incentivise private firms to hire and train fresh graduates. It means labour protections that recognise entry-level vulnerability. It also means publicly acknowledging that a healthy economy cannot funnel millions of ambitious young people into a few thousand exam-based positions without wasting human potential at scale.

Closely tied to this is the expectation that entrepreneurship will finally be treated as a serious economic lever

rather than a selectively celebrated headline. Over the past decade, founders have learned to read between the lines: funding often follows familiarity, visibility often depends on proximity, and support systems tend to reward presentation over product. The next phase must look different. Young people are watching for policies that support founders, not politically connected pitch decks. Transparent grant criteria, independent evaluation mechanisms, and publicly disclosed funding decisions are no longer optional. Beyond funding, reform is expected in the form of simplified compliance, tax relief during early years,



ILLUSTRATION: ZARIF FAIAZ

and a regulatory environment that understands experimentation and failure as features of innovation, not flaws. The state's role here is not to pick winners, but to ensure that the race itself is fair.

Education remains the fault line where expectation is sharpest. Degrees have multiplied, but confidence in their value has not. Students graduate fluent in theory yet unprepared for practice, armed with grades but lacking marketable skills. Employers complain, institutions defend themselves, and graduates are left navigating the gap alone. The expectation after this election is not cosmetic curriculum updates, but structural alignment. Degrees must translate into employability. That

requires sustained collaboration between universities and industry, mandatory and meaningful internships, and outcome-based accountability for institutions. If graduates consistently fail to transition into work, that failure must be measured and addressed. Education policy can no longer operate in isolation from labour market realities.

For women, the expectations are both urgent and overdue. The question is no longer whether women will participate in the workforce, but whether the system will finally be designed with that participation as a given. Women already work, both formally and informally, paid

struggle to keep pace with rent, time disappears into traffic, and quality of life erodes quietly. The post-election expectation is not luxury development, but liveability. Affordable rental housing for early-career workers, efficient public transport that respects time as a productive resource, and decentralised urban planning that allows opportunity to exist beyond a handful of overburdened zones. Cities must be redesigned as ecosystems where ambition is supported, not punished. Underlying all of this is a broader shift in how young people relate to the state. This is a generation that is informed, comparative, and acutely aware of global benchmarks. They are not waiting to be inspired; they are watching to be convinced. Accountability, in this context, is not rhetorical, but measurable. It shows up in employment data, business survival rates, graduate outcomes, women's workforce retention, and cost-of-living indices. It demands timelines instead of slogans, benchmarks instead of visions, and course correction instead of denial.

The election has created a rare alignment between political transition and generational readiness. Young people are not asking for perfection. They are asking for direction that is coherent, fair, and economically grounded. They understand that reform is incremental, but they also understand when momentum is absent. What they expect now is evidence that opportunity is being built deliberately, across sectors, across cities, and across careers. This moment will not be judged by speeches delivered this week, but by policies implemented in the months that follow. Whether a graduate can find meaningful work without surrendering dignity. Whether a founder can build without navigating informal gatekeepers. Whether a woman can plan a career without calculating exits. Whether a city allows its youth to live, not just endure. These are the outcomes that will define this electoral cycle for young people.

As the country prepares to vote, the expectation is clear. The next government inherits not just power, but scrutiny. Young people are no longer waiting to be told to hope. They are prepared to measure. And this time, they are paying attention to what happens after the ballots are counted.

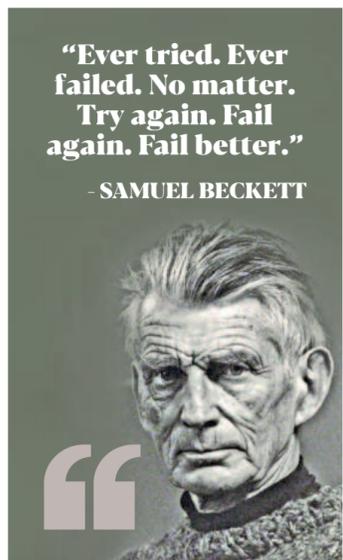
Google plans to add AI-powered "auto browse" to Chrome

NEXT STEP DESK

Google is preparing to introduce an artificial intelligence (AI) feature in its Chrome browser called 'auto browse' that can carry out multi-step online tasks on behalf of users, according to a recent blog post by the company.

The update represents a further evolution of Gemini in Chrome as the assistant was first introduced as a tool for answering questions and summarising content on individual webpages. Google has since expanded its functions to include comparing products across multiple tabs and recalling previously visited pages, while signalling its intention to automate more routine online activities.

With auto browse enabled, Gemini will be able to analyse images displayed in the browser, identify items within them, and search for similar products online. It can then add selected items to a shopping basket and apply discount codes while adhering to a user's stated budget. For tasks that require authentication, Gemini can also use Chrome's password manager to sign into accounts, as per Google.



"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

-SAMUEL BECKETT

Work-work balance

The delicate art of juggling multiple jobs

SHAMS RASHID TONMOY

We often hear about the struggle for work-life balance, where you are trying to find the best equilibrium between your professional responsibilities and real-life obligations. But for a growing number of people, the challenge is more complex: work-work balance. This is the precarious act of managing time, energy, and income across two separate jobs, while still trying to salvage scraps of time for everything and everyone else.

The concept isn't widely discussed, in part because many employers formally prohibit secondary employment. Yet economic reality both here and worldwide tells a different story. Faced with rising costs, stagnant wages, and without a financial cushion, more individuals are turning to multiple income streams out of sheer necessity. What begins as a financial stopgap can quickly become a complex, exhausting juggling act. The question shifts from "How do I leave work at the office?" to "Which office, or gig, or shift, demands my attention right now?"

This layered existence introduces unique pressures. Conflicting schedules, competing priorities, and the constant mental load of switching contexts can make the endeavour feel unsustainable. But take a step back, catch your breath, and you will realise that breaking this down into a few manageable steps can help you tackle this seemingly unachievable act.

Step 1: Define your 'why' and prioritise accordingly

Before you can balance anything, you must know what you're balancing for. Is this purely a financial bridge, or is one job a stepping stone toward a new career? Start your 'balance' by creating a candid list for each role, weighing factors like immediate pay, schedule flexibility, skill development, and long-term relevance to your goals.

If covering rent is the urgent driver, the higher-paying job may take precedence. But if professional growth is a key aim, you might allocate more mental energy to the role that offers valuable experience, even if its current pay is lower. Your 'why' then becomes your compass, helping you decide where to invest your best hours and where to set firmer limits.

Step 2: Manage your two main logistics: time and money

With two jobs, efficiency is non-negotiable. Your calendar is your command centre. Block out all committed hours for Job A, Job B, and, critically, dedicated personal time. Treat these personal blocks as unbreakable appointments. Use digital tools and



ILLUSTRATION: ZARIF FAIAZ

colour-coding to visualise your week at a glance, and share relevant availability with employers to preempt conflicts.

Financial management is equally tactical. Track your income from each source against essential expenses. Begin by calculating your true hourly yield after accounting for costs like commuting or work-specific attire. Identify and eliminate 'leakage', i.e. those small, unnecessary spends that undermine your hard work. The goal is to ensure your extra labour translates into meaningful financial progress and not just survival.

Step 3: Take care of your health and well-being

This is the most easily neglected yet most critical step. Your health is the foundation upon which this dual structure is built. Working two jobs is a marathon and requires deliberate recovery, and as such, schedule breaks proactively. A full day off from all work each week is ideal, but even micro-breaks such as a quiet coffee or a short walk can serve as vital system resets.

Chronic fatigue, irritability, and declining performance are signals of your waning long-term health. Use your allotted time off from both jobs to truly disconnect. The occasional long weekend or vacation is not a luxury; it's maintenance. Neglect this, and you risk a breakdown that could cost you both incomes.

Step 4: Build guardrails and find synergy

Juggling two roles requires a dual mindset: one focused on integration, the other on separation. First, seek synergy. Audit your tasks and skills across both jobs. Can a skill from one be applied to improve efficiency in the other? Even small efficiencies, such as listening to a relevant audiobook during a commute for Job A, or using a lunch break from

Job B to handle life-admin tasks, add to your saved time and mental space.

However, integration must be counterbalanced by strict, non-negotiable boundaries. Your time is your most finite resource, and you must guard it with professionalism and clarity. This means mastering the art of the polite but firm decline. Phrases like "I can't commit to that deadline given my current workload," or "My availability ends at 6 PM," should be your much-needed declarations of structure. Use calendar tools proactively to block out time for your second job and, just as importantly, for rest. Communicate these limitations early and consistently to manage expectations.

Step 5: Conduct regular reality checks

Your work-work arrangement should be dynamic. Every few months, conduct a formal review: Is this job still serving its purpose? Has your financial situation improved? Is the cost to your health or relationships too high? Be prepared to pivot. Perhaps you can renegotiate hours, drop the more draining job, or leverage newly gained skills to consolidate into a single, better role.

Finding the equilibrium

At the end of the day, achieving work-work balance is less about perfect symmetry and more about creating a stable, purposeful structure. It requires honesty about your limits, discipline with your time, and constant vigilance over your well-being. The aim is to use this demanding phase to build security and opportunity and not to further perpetuate a cycle of exhaustion. By strategising thoughtfully, you can navigate this challenge, meet your obligations, and protect the person at the centre of it all - you. Remember, even the most skilled juggler knows that catching one ball at a time is what keeps them all in the air.

JOBS SPOTLIGHT



UNICEF
Management Information System Assistant

Deadline: February 19

Eligibility:

- Secondary degree in data science, or engineering, including IT, statistics, development studies or related subjects.

Minimum experience: 5 years

CARE
Bangladesh

Technical Facilitator

Deadline: February 14

Eligibility:

- Graduate degree in a relevant discipline. A diploma or Bachelor's degree in Agriculture, Fisheries, or Livestock will be given preference.

Minimum experience: 2 years



The Asia Foundation

Deputy Team Leader

Deadline: February 23

Eligibility:

- Bachelor's degree in political science, public administration, public policy, law, international development, or related field.

Minimum experience: 7 years

International Justice Mission (IJM)

Coordinator Training & Development

Deadline: N/A

Eligibility:

- Prior work experience in organising training events or similar program events and coordinating with government stakeholders and vendors.

Minimum experience: 2-4 years

FOR MORE DETAILS AND THE APPLICATION LINKS, SCAN THE QR CODE BELOW.



Stanford students raise \$2 mil for student founder accelerator



NEXT STEP DESK

Two Stanford University students have raised \$2 million to fund and expand an accelerator program designed for entrepreneurs still in university or recently graduated.

The program, called Breakthrough Ventures, was founded by recent graduate Roman Scott and master's candidate Itbaan Nafi, according to a report by TechCrunch on the matter. They began by hosting demo days at Stanford in 2024 and have now secured funding from venture capital firms, including Mayfield and Collide Capital. The accelerator aims to fill a funding and network gap for student entrepreneurs. The program offers participants grant funding of up to \$10,000, access to legal support, mentorship, and compute credits from partners like Microsoft.

At the end of the program, founders have the opportunity to receive a follow-on investment of \$50,000. The program will use a hybrid model with in-person meetups and will culminate in a demo day at Stanford. The founder duo hopes to deploy their \$2 million fund over three years to incubate at least 100 companies, adds the report.

SPORT

What to WATCH

T SPORTS
T20 World Cup
Australia vs Zimbabwe
Live from 11:30 am
Canada vs UAE
Live from 3:30 pmNetherlands vs USA
Live from 7:30 pm
Women's Asia Cup Rising Stars
Nepal vs Pakistan
Live from 8:30 am

Italy's historic cricketing moment

Italy, a nation widely known for its footballing heritage, romped to a historic 10-wicket victory in their T20 World Cup 2026 Group C encounter against Nepal at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. The lowest-ranked side in the 20-team event, Italy bundled out Nepal for 123 in 19.3 overs before the Mosca brothers -- Anthony (62* off 32) and Justin (60* off 44) -- stitched together a record 124-run stand to steer the football-crazy nation to a dominant win in just 12.4 overs.

- The win marked Italy's first-ever victory in T20 World Cups, having made their debut in this edition of the tournament.
- It was only the second 10-wicket win by an associate nation in the tournament's history, after Oman's similar-margin victory over PNG in 2021.
- This was Italy's first 10-wicket win and Nepal's second 10-wicket defeat in T20Is (after vs WI in 2025).
- Italy won with 44 balls remaining -- the most in an associate nation's victory in T20 World Cups. It is also the third-most in a successful 120-plus chase in the tournament's history.
- The Mosca brothers' 124-run stand is the highest partnership between siblings in T20 World Cups, surpassing Kamran Akmal and Umar Akmal's 96-run partnership for Pakistan against Australia in the 2014 edition.
- Anthony's 62* is the highest individual score by an Italian in T20 World Cups.
- The win lifted Italy to third in Group C and pushed England down to fourth, with West Indies leading the group. Nepal, meanwhile, remained at the bottom of the table, a far cry from the side that ran England close on Sunday.



“It's pretty extraordinary really. It's something a lot of people in Italy, a lot of people in this group, have dreamed of.”

— Harry Manenti
Italy's stand-in skipper

Italy's Anthony Mosca celebrates after the win. PHOTO: AFP

SHANAKA HITS 19-BALL FIFTY AS SL CRUSH OMAN



SPORTS REPORTER

In a match that saw the fastest half-century by a Sri Lankan in T20Is and the joint-slowest fifty ever in T20 World Cups, co-hosts Sri Lanka outplayed Associate side Oman, completing a one-sided 105-run win in their Group B match at the Pallekele International Cricket Stadium yesterday.

Sri Lanka skipper Dasun Shanaka hit a 19-ball 50 -- overtaking his own record of a 20-ball fifty against India in 2023 -- while Kusal Mendis made 61 off 45 balls, and Pavan Rathnayake struck a 28-ball 60 as Sri Lanka piled on 225/5 in their 20 overs, the highest score in the ongoing T20 World Cup.

“Very pleased the way we batted today,” Shanaka said after the match. “We used the conditions very well. Kusal and Pavan planned the innings well, Kamindu [Mendis] and myself gave the finishing touches. It is the more of the way we wanted to play.”

Sri Lanka then restricted Oman to 120/9, to complete their second win in as many games in the tournament.

Oman's Mohammad Nadeem scored an unbeaten 53 off 56 balls, reaching his half-century off 52 balls -- the joint slowest in the Men's T20 World Cup, alongside Pakistan's Mohammad Rizwan, who had done so against Canada in 2024. At 43 years and 161 days, Nadeem is now also the oldest to score a fifty in any ICC tournament, overtaking Netherlands' Flavian Aponso (43y 121d), who scored 58 against Pakistan in the 1996 ODI World Cup.

Australia, Netherlands, UAE chase crucial wins

AGENCIES

Three intriguing contests headline today's T20 World Cup action, with Australia taking on Zimbabwe, USA meeting Netherlands, and UAE clashing with Canada in matches that could shape the race to the Super Eight.

Australia vs Zimbabwe sees the five-time champions looking to build momentum after a turbulent build-up overshadowed by injuries and off-field distractions.

Australia answered critics with a clinical demolition of Ireland, showcasing their depth as Nathan Ellis marked his return from injury with a sharp spell and the batting unit fired in unison.

However, uncertainty remains over captain Mitchell Marsh's availability, leaving Australia slightly unsettled. Zimbabwe, meanwhile, arrive brimming with confidence after crushing Oman in their opener. Though Australia will start as favourites, Zimbabwe's renewed energy and belief make them a potential threat in Colombo.

USA face a must-win situation against Netherlands after pushing India hard but falling convincingly to Pakistan. Another defeat would end their Super Eight hopes, and history offers little comfort -- they are yet to beat the Dutch in three T20I attempts. Netherlands, buoyed by Bas de Leede's all-round brilliance against Namibia and valuable preparation time in Chennai, appear settled and confident.

UAE and Canada round off the day in a clash between closely ranked sides. UAE, slightly more experienced and battle-tested against full members, will look to rebound from a heavy loss to New Zealand. Canada, also smarting from defeat, seek a statement win in only their second-ever T20I meeting with UAE.

BCL one-dayers set for return after two-year gap

SPORTS REPORTER

At a time when the cricketers are feeling the pinch of the ICC T20 World Cup exclusion, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is planning to bring back the Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL) 50-over tournament later this month, to help the players prepare for the home series against Pakistan in March.

The BCL one-day tournament was last held in 2023, when the Akbar Ali-led North Zone emerged as champions.

“According to our initial schedule, the tournament was slated to begin on February 20. But we may have to push back the schedule by 2-3 days as the players have been given a lengthy vacation. If the preparation goes well, we may start on the 22nd or 23rd,” a tournament committee official informed.

It was learned that national team players will start fitness training individually before getting two days of practice session in Bogura and Rajshahi, where the tournament will take place.

“We haven't had a BCL 50-over tournament in the last two years. This time, we will be using Kookaburra balls since we have the series against Pakistan coming up and most of the national team players will compete in the tournament,” the official added.

The four-team event will see each side play three matches in the league stage and the top two teams will play the final.

The BCB sources informed that they are looking to conclude the tournament by March 3, to give the national team players ample time to gear up for the Pakistan ODIs, set to take place between March 12-16 at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur.

The Tigers last played an ODI series against West Indies at home in October 2025. However, with many ODI assignments coming up, the BCB intends to prepare sporting wickets to help the team get into ODI gear.



Milner equals all-time PL appearance record

MOST PL APPEARANCES

James Milner* - 653	Frank Lampard - 609
Gareth Barry - 653	David James - 572
Ryan Giggs - 632	Mark Schwarzer - 544

James Milner drew level with the Premier League's all-time appearance record on Wednesday, coming off the bench at Aston Villa to register his 653rd match in the competition. The 40-year-old, a two-time champion with Manchester City and once with Liverpool, matched Gareth Barry's landmark. Milner's Premier League journey began with Leeds United on November 10, 2002, when he was just 16 years and 309 days old. He made 48 league appearances for Leeds before a move to Newcastle United, where he played 94 times. Milner later featured in 230 Premier League games for Liverpool, 147 for Manchester City and 100 for Aston Villa, while his ongoing spell at Brighton & Hove Albion has so far brought 34 appearances. His 24-year presence in the league is the longest in Premier League history. Across that span, Milner has scored 56 goals and supplied 90 assists. Milner equalled Barry but he did so having played significantly fewer minutes than Barry did over his career. In total, Barry spent 54,439 minutes on the pitch compared to 40,408 for Milner. Remarkably, almost half of the 5,094 players to have appeared in the Premier League since its inception in 1992-93 have either played with or against him.



India overpowered Namibia with both bat and ball to complete a comprehensive 93-run win in their second Group A match in the ICC T20 World Cup in Delhi yesterday. Ishan Kishan starred with a 24-ball 61 while Hardik Pandya hit a brisk 52 off 28 deliveries as India posted a daunting 209-9. Varun Chakravarthy then picked up 3-7 in two overs and Pandya and Axar Patel claimed two wickets each to bundle out Namibia for 116 in 18.2 overs. PHOTO: AFP

Salah equals Gerrard; Van Dijk boosts Liverpool's UCL push



AGENCIES

Virgil van Dijk hauled Liverpool back into the race for Champions League qualification, sealing a hard-fought 1-0 win at Sunderland on Wednesday.

The Reds captain struck in the second half to hand Sunderland their first home defeat of the Premier League season.

Van Dijk rose to meet Mohamed Salah's corner in the 61st minute, his powerful header forcing Habib Diarra to nod the ball

into the roof of his own net in a desperate, but futile, attempt to clear off the line.

The assist carried Salah to 92 in the Premier League for Liverpool, drawing him level with Steven Gerrard for the most by a Reds player in the competition. Only six players sit above the Egyptian on the league's all-time list.

Van Dijk, meanwhile, continues to set his own benchmarks. Since arriving in January 2018, he has scored 23 Premier League goals -- more than any other defender in that period -- and he now stands as Liverpool's highest-scoring defender of all time.

Sixth-placed Liverpool's second win in their last eight league outings lifted them within two points of fifth-placed Chelsea and three of fourth-placed Manchester United.

Boss Arne Slot admitted it would be unacceptable if Liverpool failed to reach the Champions League, saying his side would need to be “close to perfection” in the run-in after their 2-1 defeat to Manchester City earlier in the week.

This display was far from perfect, but it proved sufficient to keep Liverpool firmly in the hunt for a top-five finish that is likely to secure Champions League qualification.



Bangladesh 'A' captain Fahima Khatun, alongside the captains of seven other participating teams in the Asia Cup Rising Stars Women's 2026 tournament, pose for a picture yesterday in Bangkok, Thailand. The tournament begins today, with Bangladesh, placed in Group B, opening their campaign tomorrow against Sri Lanka 'A'. Previously known as the ACC Women's T20 Emerging Teams Asia Cup, the competition was first staged in Hong Kong in 2023, with Bangladesh finishing as runners-up. PHOTO: ACC



SUDDEN ILLNESS Eight people die in, around polling centres

STAR REPORT

At least eight people, including a presiding officer, a polling officer, and a member of village police, died after falling ill inside or near polling stations during voting hours in seven districts yesterday.

In Khulna, a BNP leader died after falling ill following an altercation with a Jamaat activist.

The incident took place outside the Alia Madrasa polling centre in the city's Khan Jahan Ali Road area around 7:45am.

Mohibuzzaman Kochi, former office secretary of BNP's Khulna city unit, was declared dead on arrival at Khulna City Medical College Hospital.

In a statement, BNP's city unit claimed Kochi fell ill after he was pushed by the madrasa's former principal, Abdur Rashid Miah, following an altercation over seeking votes outside the polling station.

Meanwhile, Abdur Rashid admitted to journalists that there was an altercation but claimed he did not push anyone.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1



Beaming with pride, a group of young women voters, who just cast their ballots for the first time, pose for a celebratory photo outside Dhanmondi Girls' High School polling centre yesterday.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

POLLS VIOLENCE 72 injured in 14 incidents

STAR REPORT

At least 72 people were injured in 14 incidents during polling across the country yesterday.

The violence disrupted voting at several centres, prompting interventions by police and army personnel. Law enforcers detained nine people in two incidents – five in Munshiganj and four in Jhalakathi.

Several incidents occurred near polling centres. However, swift action by law enforcers allowed voting to resume at the affected centres.

In Noakhali's Hatiya, at least 31 people, including a BTV journalist, were wounded in a clash between supporters of the National Citizen Party and BNP.

Hatiya Police Station Officer-in-Charge Saiful Alam said the clash was reportedly triggered by attempts to exert influence at a polling centre.

"Several people were injured in the incident. No complaint has been filed so far," the OC said.

In Bagerhat's Sharankhola, at least 19 people were hurt in a clash between supporters of Jamaat and BNP candidates. According to police and locals, the incident took place on a road leading to a polling centre in Sonatola village.

Four of the injured were admitted to Khulna Medical College Hospital and another four to Sharankhola Upazila Health Complex, they added.

In Meherpur, clashes between BNP and Jamaat supporters left nine people injured.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

Polls offers new chapters in US-Bangladesh ties Says US representative

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The elections in Bangladesh and Nepal following uprisings offer new chapters for US engagement in South Asia, US Representative Bill Huizenga said.

In an opening remark at a hearing on US foreign policy in South Asia on Wednesday, Huizenga, who is the chairman of South and Central Asia Subcommittee at the US Congress, said Bangladesh holds free polls following its 2024 July uprising, while Nepal, after the uprising, will hold democratic elections next month.

"Both of these instances offer new chapters for engagement in South Asia, defining US relations with these new governments," the US Representative from Michigan said.

He said South and Central Asia is a dynamic region, young growing populations are more often drawn to western cultures and values than to China's authoritarian alternative.

Huizenga said South and Central Asia is home to nearly two billion people, dynamic economies and strategic waterways that shape the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Throughout the region, US President Donald Trump has successfully negotiated deals that open markets and advance US economic interests.

"Now we are going to engage and how we engage will define America's role in Asia for decades to come."

He said China, through its Belt and Road Initiative, engages in "predatory lending to further its security interests and force smaller nations into debt traps".

Furthermore, China has hardened its border with India, Nepal, and Bhutan, building infrastructure to support its military aspirations, Huizenga said.

"Despite its distance from our shores, maintaining a free and open Indian Ocean is a priority for our national and our economic security."

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

Russia pounds Ukraine with drones, missiles

Odesa, Dnipro face outages, civilian injuries; Kyiv says attacks undermine Trump-led peace initiative

REUTERS

Russia pounded Ukraine with drones and ballistic missiles overnight yesterday, further battering its energy system and leaving tens of thousands in the southern city of Odesa, said Deputy Prime Minister Oleksiy Kuleba. He added that close to 200 buildings in the strategic Black Sea port were left without heating.

Russia has intensified its winter campaign of strikes on Ukraine's power grid, plunging major cities into long periods of cold and darkness in freezing temperatures.

In Kyiv alone, around 3,500 apartment buildings were without heating yesterday after the latest attack knocked out supplies to nearly 2,600 high-rises, on top of the 1,100 already affected by previous strikes, said Mayor Vitali Klitschko.

More than 100,000 families were without electricity, according to private energy firm DTEK, which said one of its thermal power plants had been targeted but did not disclose the location.

Two people were hurt in the attack on Kyiv, which also hit a residential building, Klitschko said.

Ukraine's air force said Russia launched 24 ballistic missiles, one cruise missile and 219 drones

overnight. Air defences downed or neutralised 16 missiles and 197 drones, it said.

Nearly 300,000 people were left without water as the attack disrupted power supplies in the southern city of Odesa, said Deputy Prime Minister Oleksiy Kuleba. He added that close to 200 buildings in the strategic Black Sea port were left without heating.

Two people were killed and six more wounded in an attack on the railway hub of Lozova in the northeastern Kharkiv region bordering Russia, prosecutors said.

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 Kyiv alone, around 3,500 apartment buildings were without heating yesterday after the latest attack knocked out supplies to nearly 2,600 high-rises, on top of the 1,100 already affected by previous strikes, said Mayor Vitali Klitschko.

Military administration chief Serhij Lysak said the attack also damaged an apartment building and sparked a fire that engulfed one of the city's markets, injuring one person.

In the industrial southeastern city of Dnipro, a combined missile and drone strike wounded four people, including a baby boy and a four-year-old girl, regional governor Oleksandr Ganzha said on Telegram.

in Russia or Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine during the war, though on a far smaller scale.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiba condemned the attack as undermining a peace push led by US President Donald Trump to end the four-year war.

US-backed trilateral talks between Ukraine and Russia have so far failed to resolve key differences between the two sides,

SEE PAGE 11 COL 3

At Narsingdi-1, rivals exchange smiles, not barbs

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narsingdi

A rare display of camaraderie among rival candidates drew attention in the Narsingdi-1 (Sadar) constituency yesterday morning, as three contestants were seen chatting and exchanging light-hearted remarks while visiting polling centres.

BNP candidate Khairul Kabir Khokon, contesting with the sheaf of paddy symbol, Ibrahim Bhuiyan of the scales symbol, and Gonoodhikar Parishad candidate Advocate Shirin Akhter met at the Rajadi High School field in Narsingdi Sadar around 9:30am.

Voters and campaign workers present at the venue witnessed the exchange.

Despite being electoral opponents, the three greeted each other warmly and shared jokes, creating a relaxed atmosphere amid an otherwise competitive race.

At one point, one of them remarked, "We are on the side of a people's uprising," prompting laughter from those around. Many onlookers

SEE PAGE 11 COL 3



Canadian fossil reveals one of the first plant-eating animals

REUTERS

Scientists have unearthed in Canada's province of Nova Scotia the skull of a creature dating to about 307 million years ago that is one of the oldest-known plant-eating land vertebrates, representing a pivotal juncture in animal evolution.



The creature, named *Tyrannoroter heberti*, possessed a somewhat triangle-shaped skull that facilitated large cheek muscles for eating tough plant material, with a mouth full of specialised teeth to crush, shred and grind vegetation.

Tyrannoroter looked like a reptile but is not actually included in that class of animals, instead categorised as part of a group called microsaurs. While the researchers have discovered only its skull, they estimate based on the anatomy of related animals that *Tyrannoroter* was about 12 inches (30.5 cm) long, with a stocky build akin to today's blue-tongued skink.



Army personnel patrolling the Madhubagh area in the capital yesterday to prevent any untoward incidents during voting and ensure voters' safety and security.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

3 blind men defy all odds to cast vote

SAURAV HOSSAIN SIAM, Narayanganj

Three visually impaired men travelled across districts yesterday to cast their ballots, saying they were determined to fulfil their civic duty and be recognised as equal citizens.



Mohammad Jewel, Monir Hossain and Mohammad Jasim arrived at polling centres in Narayanganj despite the challenges of their daily lives.

Jasim has been blind since birth, while the other two lost their sight in early childhood due to illness. The trio earn a living by hawking goods on public transport in different districts.

Around 12:30pm, Monir and Jewel were seen leaving the Haji Shamsuddin High School polling

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4