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PM says at iftar with foreign diplomats

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman yesterday sought deeper engagement with the international community through partnerships rooted in expanded trade and investment, technology transfer, cultural and educational exchanges, and stronger people-to-people ties.

"We believe prosperity today is built through cooperation and connectivity, not isolation," he said before an iftar hosted in honour of diplomats at the State Guest House Jamuna, according to PM's Press Secretary Saleh Shibby.

Ambassadors and representatives of foreign missions stationed in Dhaka, ministers, state ministers, and lawmakers attended the event, according to officials concerned.

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Eid shoppers throng Dhaka's New Market area yesterday as the weekend drew crowds, causing severe traffic congestion. Some hawkers taking up half the width of the street for their shops only made things worse.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

NATIONAL ELECTION

Record 16.91 lakh ballots rejected

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

An unprecedented number of ballots was rejected in the February 12 national polls.

According to the Election Commission data, 16,91,080 ballots were cancelled, amounting to 2.20 percent of the 7,66,81,193 votes cast. Since 1991, the tally of invalid ballots has never crossed the 10-lakh mark.

EC officials said ballots are usually cancelled if a voter does not mark any option, selects more than one option, or marks an option incorrectly.

The January 2024 election, which was one-sided as major parties, including the BNP and Jamaat, boycotted the polls, saw 9,98,188 invalid votes, or 1.98 percent of ballots cast, according to EC data.

In the 2018 polls, marred by allegations of ballot box stuffing on the night before voting, the invalid ballots were 8,87,690, just 1.06 percent.

The 2014 election, another one-sided contest due to the boycott by major parties, including BNP and Jamaat, saw 153 candidates elected unopposed, leaving voting necessary in only 147 constituencies. That year, 2,63,037 ballots were rejected, amounting to 1.51 percent of total ballots cast.

Meanwhile, the 2008 election, in which all registered parties took part, recorded 6,36,294 disallowed votes, less than 1 percent.

Before that national polls, 4,49,082 ballots were cancelled in 2001, also less than 1 percent. In the June 1996 election, the number of invalid votes were 4,62,302,

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Scientists grow chickpeas in 'moon dirt'

REUTERS, Washington

Scientists working to cultivate the field of extraterrestrial agriculture have grown chickpeas in dirt made mostly of simulated lunar soil, a step toward enabling astronauts on long-term moon missions to produce their own food.

Researchers said harvestable chickpeas were grown in soil mixtures composed primarily of "moon dirt" modeled after lunar samples retrieved during Nasa's Apollo missions more than half a century ago.

Chickpeas of a variety called "Myles" were raised in a climate-controlled growth chamber at Texas A&M University. Seeds were coated with beneficial fungi and planted in a mix of the simulated lunar soil, made by Florida-based company Space Resource Technologies, and a nutrient-rich substance called vermicompost produced when earthworms break down organic waste.

Harvestable chickpeas grew in soil mixtures of up to 75 percent lunar simulant. As the percentage of simulated moon soil - known as regolith - increased, the number of harvestable chickpeas decreased, though the size of the chickpeas remained stable. Seeds planted in 100 percent lunar simulant failed to produce flowers and seeds, experiencing early death.



We were not consulted before US deal: Jamaat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman has said his party was not consulted on agreements signed with different countries during the tenure of the interim government.

"Several agreements were signed with different countries during the tenure of the previous interim government. Unfortunately, the government did not consult us in any way regarding those deals," he wrote in a post on his verified Facebook account yesterday.

Shafiqur said Jamaat had repeatedly demanded that, in the absence of a parliament, the interim administration should consult political parties before taking decisions on major issues such as international agreements, as it had done on several other national matters.

"However, the government at the time did not take our demands into consideration. Our position on the matter is therefore clear, and there is no room for confusion," he added.

His remarks came amid controversy over comments

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Three-year-old party set to sweep Nepal polls

REUTERS, Kathmandu

A three-year-old party led by rapper-turned-politician Balendra Shah looked set to sweep Nepal's general election yesterday, trouncing established rivals in a result analysts likened to a "tsunami".

Thirty-five-year-old Shah and his Rastriya Swatantra Party were on course to win a majority in the 275-member lower house of parliament, leading in 100 of the 137 seats, the election commission said.

At 1200 GMT, vote counting was under way for 165 seats filled by direct election in the 275-member lower house, while the rest will be decided through proportional representation.

Balendra Shah, the former mayor of the capital Kathmandu, has dominated the race to become prime minister, gaining near-rockstar-like fame on social media across the Himalayan nation after a youth-led uprising.

"At least one member from each household seems to have voted for it (RSP). Otherwise this type of tsunami would not have been possible," analyst Puranjan Acharya told Reuters.

Political instability has plagued the nation of 30 million for decades, crippling a largely agrarian economy grappling with unemployment and corruption.

That unrest erupted into street protests last September after a social media ban brought thousands onto the streets, triggering clashes and deaths that led to former prime minister K P Sharma Oli's resignation.

The Nepali Congress, the country's oldest party, was leading in 10 seats and had won just one. Vice President Bishwa Prakash Sharma said in a post on X that the party had accepted the voters' verdict.

"I voted for Rastriya Swatantra Party because Balen is there," said



Balendra Shah's Rastriya Swatantra Party is ahead in 100 of 137 directly elected seats in the lower house.

Shah, 35, has gained near-rockstar fame among youth.

Balendra Shah, a rapper-turned-politician and the prime ministerial candidate for Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP).

PHOTO: REUTERS



Trump hints US will turn to Cuba after Iran

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump suggested Thursday that he would turn to an unspecified project for Cuba, the Caribbean island already facing a US energy blockade, after the war against Iran.

"We want to fix, finish this one first -- but that will be just a question of time before you and a lot of unbelievable people are going to be going back to Cuba," Trump said at a White House reception.

Addressing US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, the Miami-born son of Cuban immigrants, Trump added: "You've been doing a fantastic job on a place called Cuba."

Washington has

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Afghan-Pak troops trade fire

US says over 1,15,000 displaced

REUTERS, Kabul

Pakistani and Afghan troops exchanged fire at dozens of points along their border yesterday as the UN said their week-old conflict has forced the displacement of more than 100,000 people.

- No negotiations taking place to end conflict: Pak
- Taliban strikes Pak base in Balochistan province
- Kabul provides safe haven to militants: Islamabad

The South Asian nations show no signs of rapprochement in their worst fighting in years, adding to the volatility in a region also contending with US and Israeli strikes on Iran - a nation that borders both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Combat has included Pakistani air strikes on Taliban government installations, such as the Bagram air base north of the Afghan capital Kabul.

Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense said Taliban forces struck Pakistani military installations along the 2,600-

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As onion flowers bloom, farmers are busy tending the fields. Besides spraying pesticides, pollination is also being done using sticks wrapped with a piece of cloth. As seed prices are good, many have turned to seed production. The photo was taken in Rajshahi's Godagari upazila.

PHOTO: AZAHAR UDDIN

A stark reminder of the quality gap

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HASANAH ISLAMIC BANKING
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Prime Bank

PRAYER TIMING
MARCH 7

	Fajr	Zohr	Asr	Maghrib	Esha
AZAN	5-02	12-45	4-30	6-06	7-30
JAMAAT	5-12	1-15	4-45	6-16	8-00

SOURCE: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION

SEHRI, IFTAR TIMING

RAMADAN	MAR	SEHRI	IFTAR
17	7		6:06
18	8	4:58	6:06
19	9	4:57	6:07