

## INTERNATIONAL

## UK PM vows to 'listen to voters' after polls drubbing

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer promised on Saturday he would "listen to voters" after his Labour party received a historic drubbing in local and regional elections.

A disillusioned electorate backed hard-right and nationalist parties in Thursday's ballots — Starmer's biggest electoral test since Labour ousted the Conservatives in 2024.

"The right lesson is to listen to voters," but it "doesn't mean tacking right or left", Starmer, who has faced calls to resign, wrote in The Guardian newspaper.

The anti-immigrant Reform UK party led by populist politician Nigel Farage made gains across



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets Suvendu Adhikari, newly elected Chief Minister of West Bengal state, and cabinet ministers during a swearing-in ceremony in Kolkata yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Putin chides Nato in speech at scaled-back Victory Day parade

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Saturday that his soldiers in Ukraine were fighting an "aggressive force" backed by all of Nato and described his war goals as "just", as he addressed a scaled back Victory Day parade on Red Square.

Putin has made the memory of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in World War II a central narrative of his 25-year rule. Russian authorities typically mark the parade with pomp and grandeur.

But a spate of Ukrainian long range attacks in recent weeks prompted the Kremlin to ramp up security measures and downsize this year's celebrations.

The parade was vastly smaller compared to previous years, with no military hardware on display for the first time in nearly two decades and only a handful of foreign dignitaries in attendance — most of them leaders of Russia's close allies.

Both Moscow and Kyiv agreed to observe a



three-day ceasefire over the event, announced by US President Donald Trump. Moscow had threatened a "massive" strike on central Kyiv if Ukraine disrupted the proceedings.

In an address to the parade, attended by Russian military units as well as soldiers from North Korea, Putin invoked the Soviet victory to rally support for his army in Ukraine.

"The great feat of the generation of victors inspires the soldiers carrying out the goals of

the special military operation today," Putin said.

"They are confronting an aggressive force armed and supported by the entire Nato bloc. And despite this, our heroes move forward," he said.

"I firmly believe that our cause is just," he added later.

The speech drew a cool reception from some in Moscow, with internet outages and fatigue over the four-year Ukraine war casting a shadow over the events.

When asked how she felt on Victory Day, which marks the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, 36-year-old economist Elena replied: "Nothing."

"I need the internet, and I don't have it," she told AFP from central Moscow, saying she would not watch the parade.

After two failed attempts at truces this week by both Russia and Ukraine, Trump announced on Friday a three-day ceasefire between both sides would come into effect from May 9.



England, Scotland and Wales — though Scottish and Welsh parties took the biggest share of seats in those elections.

With almost all votes tallied, the results were grim for Labour.

Starmer has vowed to remain as Britain's prime minister but admitted the party had failed to sustain the public's trust that it was doing enough to deliver change.

Despite the scale of the electoral mauling no immediate move was made to challenge his leadership and cabinet colleagues appeared to publicly rally round.

## Mothers in chars find hope

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There were also cases where traditional birth attendants tried to deliver babies, and the child died during the process. When women here go into labour, people have no option except motorcycles or horse carts to take them to health facilities."

She said most women in the area experience repeated pregnancies, with some giving birth to as many as 12 or 13 children. Early marriage remains widespread, with many girls married off between the ages of 14 and 16, while family planning services are almost non-existent.

"Families often try delivering at home before bringing mothers here. By the time they arrive, both mother and baby [are in] critical condition."

In Bangladesh's remote char regions, where river erosion and isolation often cut communities off from basic services, healthcare has long been a matter of survival.

BRAC's CHARMS (Char Health and Resilience for Mothers and Society) project has been changing that reality through "Sushasthya" healthcare centres in Char Ghorjan [in Sirajganj], serving nearly 30,000 residents who previously lacked access to local maternal care.

Operating 24 hours a day, the centres provide safe delivery services, maternal care, vaccinations, diagnostic tests, and telemedicine support in one of Bangladesh's most climate-vulnerable and geographically isolated regions.

Taherima said, "Now almost everyone comes to this centre because there is no other place across these char villages where pregnant women can get treatment. We handle all normal deliveries here, but if complications arise and a normal delivery is not possible, we are still forced to refer patients to hospitals in Shahzadpur Upazila or Enayetpur."

The centre keeps motorcycles and horse carts ready for emergency transport. But even after reaching government hospitals, many women struggle to receive proper care and often prefer private hospitals — an option many cannot afford.

"In those cases, BRAC provides Tk 5,000 in assistance for referred patients," she said.

The facility, which operates with three midwives, one paramedic, and a 24-hour telemedicine doctor, now treats more patients than it was originally designed for.

"The maternal death rate has dropped significantly," Taherima said. "This healthcare project was planned for three years. But if the people here want it to continue, perhaps BRAC will extend it further. It's already been a year and a half

since we began."

Since opening, the BRAC-run facility has conducted more than 100 deliveries and referred 21 women for caesarean sections.

Before the health centre opened, many pregnant women in the char villages sought medical help only after complications had already turned life-threatening.

Community health workers recruited from the char villages are visiting homes to raise awareness about maternal healthcare, safe deliveries, and postnatal care, while BRAC works with midwives, adolescents, and community leaders to challenge long-standing taboos around institutional childbirth.

According to paramedic physician Amit Hasan Hridoy, more women in the remote char region are now seeking regular check-ups and early treatment, improving outcomes for mothers and newborns.

"However, early marriage remains a major concern. Many girls become pregnant before their bodies are ready," he said, adding that early pregnancies often leave both mothers and babies malnourished and vulnerable to complications.

Mohammad Jobbar Ali, a community leader in his 60s, said, "Maternal and infant deaths have fallen a lot compared to before. When this centre was first proposed, we believed it would change our lives, and it has."

"Our roads and transport are still very poor," he said. "Earlier, many mothers died on the way to the city while trying to get treatment. But now our situation is much better."

Although some nearby villages technically have government community clinics, Jobbar said residents rarely receive meaningful healthcare services there.

"It feels like neither the government nor anyone else even knows that so many people live here. Nobody thinks about us. But this BRAC health centre is saving our lives."

The healthcare project is currently scheduled to run for three years, but Jobbar said villagers are desperate for it to continue.

"When the project period ends, the centre is supposed to close. But we need it to survive. For us, this health centre is essential."

Mahfuzur Rahman, project manager of BRAC's CHARMS project, said the initiative is working not only to provide healthcare but also to improve the overall quality of life for people living in remote char communities.

"Through these healthcare services, we are trying to ensure they receive the treatment and support they need. Our goal is to ensure safe motherhood and childhood."

## BNP grassroots

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Minister Tarique Rahman sat with leaders and activists from across the country.

A dozen ministers, who are also senior BNP leaders, attended the meeting and presented their ministerial activities since taking office.

Party insiders said the meeting was part of a new internal review process through which ministers will brief party leaders and activists every four months on their work, plans, and progress.

A standing committee member said the initiative was aimed at creating a "party parliament" where grassroots leaders would be able to hear directly from ministers and raise questions.

"The prime minister said this will be like a party parliament. As there is accountability in parliament, there should also be accountability among party leaders and activists."

Twelve ministers, including those from the LGDR, finance, energy, health, and water resources ministries, attended the meeting along with members of the BNP standing committee. Each minister answered questions from party leaders and activists.

At the meeting, Tarique instructed leaders and activists to prepare for the upcoming upazila elections.

He also asked leaders at district, upazila and union levels to improve coordination and strengthen ties among themselves.

Party sources said the BNP national council will be held within this year. Before that, committees of all grassroots units will be formed through elections.

BNP's affiliated organisations would be reorganised before the national council, expected by December this year, he added.

In his address, Tarique called upon leaders and activists to support the government while maintaining discipline and public trust. The government would do its job, while the party would maintain its political relationship with the people.

He also instructed leaders not to depend on government officials and to keep the party's organisational activities active.

A major focus of the meeting was discipline at the grassroots.

Tarique asked party leaders and activists to remain united, follow organisational rules, and ensure that no one violates discipline.

He also instructed them to play a responsible role in maintaining peace and law and order at the local level.

BNP leadership believes that although the party is now in power, any excess, show of influence, or attempt by leaders and activists to take the law into their own hands could damage the government's image.

## Owners' business interests often hurt

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Speaking at the conference, Kamal Ahmed, also the consulting editor of The Daily Star, said the roots of the problem lie partly in how media houses came into existence. Under Bangladesh's Printing Presses and Publications (Declaration and Registration) Act, 1973, the barrier to entry for setting up a media outlet is just Tk 5 lakh — a threshold so low, he argued, that it has allowed anyone with political connections to obtain a licence and then find an industrialist to bankroll the operation.

He also called for mandatory voluntary disclosures from corporate-owned media outlets. "If a corporate house has stakes in a particular industry and its newsroom covers that industry, there should be a public disclosure of that conflict of interest," he said, adding that without such transparency, readers have no way of knowing whose interests a news organisation is serving.

Kamal proposed appointing a "readers' editor" in every newsroom to protect audience interests.

International media law expert Joan Barata added that Bangladesh's licensing regime is itself an anomaly.

"In most countries, there is no requirement to license a newspaper at all — only technical licences for frequency allocation are necessary for broadcast media."

The existence of such barriers, he argued, creates the conditions for political and business interests to control who enters the media landscape from the outset.

He said licensing is entirely separate from regulation — and regulation has nothing to do with the state.

"Self-regulation is about ethics; and the European Court of Human Rights has said that defining ethical and professional standards is not something states can do. It is something journalists should do... It is based on moral authority, not legal authority."

Joan also criticised the Bangladesh Press Council, saying it cannot genuinely be called self-regulation.

In a separate session, Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh, said press freedom is inseparable from fundamental rights, freedom of speech, and accountability within the broader governance system.

"A 'winner-takes-all' or zero-sum game has been going on in Bangladesh's politics for a long time. The politics of money, muscle power, and partisanisation are controlling the entire governance system," he said, adding, "Every state institution has been subjected to extreme politicisation."

He observed that dissent and the disclosure of information are often treated as threats to monopoly power, negatively affecting the media.

Speaking about the growing influence of business interests in politics, Iftekharuzzaman said the proportion of MPs primarily involved in business rose from 17.5 percent in the country's first parliament to 60.9 percent in the current 13th Jatiya Sangsad.

He also said Bangladesh's performance in indexes related to democracy, rule of law, good governance, political stability, voice and accountability, civic space, and corruption remains "deeply embarrassing".

Kamal Ahmed said, "The media is a part of society. If there is no democracy in society, it is difficult to expect it in the media."

## Press freedom

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set fire to The Daily Star office must be punished.

The newspaper should also try to unmask the culprits through investigation reports, he said.

He also urged the paper to organise roundtables and seminars in different regions of the country, not just in the capital, where it regularly organises such events.

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said that MPs must support independent journalism because it is one of the major supporting forces for anyone seeking to earn people's trust and understand public opinion.

He said ruling party MPs may not always get the truth from bureaucracy, administration or intelligence channels, while opposition MPs often face the same problem when relying on information from party loyalists.

"Truth will come to you through independent journalism. Please always remember this," he said, addressing the lawmakers.

He also reminded the MPs of their dual existence. They are nominated by parties, but become MPs through people's votes.

"Please do not forget that one reason for your existence is the voters, and another is the party. Your loyalty should be to both sides," he said.

Mahfuz Anam said MPs often hesitate to speak for people due to party directives, pressure or fear.

Referring to the BNP government's "Bangladesh First" policy, he said it must be reflected in political thought, words, values and actions.

"When you say, 'Bangladesh First,' your entire thinking must put Bangladesh first, not your party first," he said, adding that politicians should not claim to put Bangladesh first while insisting the country's interest is served only if their party wins.

"At this moment, parliament can become a dream place for us. MPs can make that happen," he said, urging greater accountability from the new government.

He said one of the major failures of past governments, particularly the "fascist government" of the last 15 years, was blocking every path of free expression. Citing the Digital Security Act, he said it was used to take away people's freedom, humiliate them and send them to jail. "The people, not those who used the law, have ultimately won," he added.

The programme began at 4:30pm with the national anthem and a minute of silence to honour the martyrs of the Language Movement, the struggle for independence, the Liberation War, and the July 2024 uprising. A documentary on the newspaper's 35-year history, highlighting last year's arson attack, was screened, alongside a photography exhibition.

The event opened with a speech delivered by Dipankar Roy, Khulna correspondent for The Daily Star, welcoming the guests.

Other speakers included Swapan Kumar Guha, executive director of Rupantar; Kudrat-e-Khuda, former president of Sachetan Nagorik Committee; SK Noor Alam, representative of Waterkeepers Bangladesh of the Pashur river; Enamul Haq, former president of Khulna Press Club; Mostafa Sarwar, current president of the club; and Bibhas Mandal, a farmer from Batiaghata.

Members of the Khulna Hawkers Union were also present and exchanged greetings.

The Khulna celebrations followed central anniversary events at the newspaper's Dhaka office on April 24–25. Earlier, the divisional tour began in Chattogram on May 2.

## Interim govt curbed freedoms

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On December 18, following the killing of Sharif Osman Hadi, a prominent leader of the July uprising, violent protests erupted. The offices of two media outlets — The Daily Star and Prothom Alo — were attacked and set on fire, the editor of the New Age newspaper was harassed, and cultural institution Chhayanaut was attacked.

"Oppressive restrictions continued to be imposed on the right to unionise, including excessive requirements for union registration, state interference in union activities, and arbitrary or unduly controlling registration processes," the report said.

After forming a commission to investigate enforced disappearances and signing the International Convention Against Enforced Disappearance in 2024, the interim government sought to implement the convention through a new ordinance.

The draft ordinance was initially criticised for failing to align with international human rights standards, particularly regarding the death penalty. It was also criticised for limiting command responsibility and failing to recognise the continuing nature of enforced disappearance as a crime. Some concerns were addressed in later drafts, and the ordinance was approved in December.

The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances conducted a four-day technical visit in June, meeting government stakeholders and victims.

The group urged the government to establish a victim and witness protection system, strengthen the national Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, and expressed concern over continued widespread impunity.

Also in June 2025, the national Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances submitted its second interim report to Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus.

The commission said it had received 1,837 complaints regarding enforced disappearances, of which 1,772 active cases were entered into its database after preliminary review.

Among them, 1,427 victims were reportedly found alive, while 345 remained missing. Based on its data, the commission found that 67 percent of enforced disappearances were linked to state agencies, including the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab). It also noted a "widespread and systematic culture of torture".

In February, the UN released findings from its fact-finding investigation, which found reasonable grounds to believe that the former government and its security and

intelligence apparatus, along with violent elements associated with the Awami League, systematically committed serious human rights violations.

In May, thousands of Islamist protesters gathered in Dhaka to protest reforms proposed by the Women's Affairs Reform Commission, calling them "anti-Islamic".

The Amnesty report also said cuts in USAID funding severely affected Rohingya people in Bangladesh.

## 1 held over torture

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According to the child's uncle, she could not bear the humiliation and took her own life. "We want justice," he told journalists.

The victim's father filed a case against four people, including Hannan Mollah, with Chatmohar Police Station the same night. He accused them of torture and abetment to suicide.

Speaking to The Daily Star last night, Golam Mostafa, officer-in-charge of Chatmohar Police Station, said police were trying to arrest the other accused.

"In our primary investigation, we confirmed it was a suicide. We are investigating the allegations of torture," he said, adding that the body was sent to hospital for autopsy.