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BNP leading in 175+ seats, Tarique frontrunner for PM post

Hasina's now-disbanded Awami League. Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus' interim government last year disbanded the Awami League and barred it from contesting the polls.

Meanwhile, there were reports of electoral violence from multiple places.

In Gopalganj, three persons, including a 13-year-old girl, have been injured in an alleged hand bomb attack at a polling station, BNews24 reported.

The blast occurred around 9 am on Thursday at the Reshma International School centre at Nichupara. Two members of the Ansar, a paramilitary auxiliary force responsible for election security, were among those hurt. The injured have been taken to hospital.

Zahirul Islam, the presiding officer at the polling station, said the injuries were minor and that voting resumed shortly afterwards.

In a separate incident, a series of hand bomb explosions have taken place outside a polling station in the Munshiganj-3 constituency, temporarily disrupting voting.

The blasts occurred around 10:15 am on Thursday in front of the Makhati Gurucharan High School centre. Between 10 and 12 crude bombs were detonated, officials said. Voting at the centre was suspended for around 15 minutes.

Presiding Officer Md Titumir said the explosions caused panic among voters. "We stopped voting briefly, but it has now started again and people are casting their ballots," he said.

Also, a BNP leader died during an altercation with Jamaat-e-Islami activists outside a polling centre in Khulna.

The BNP says that he died when a Jamaat leader "pushed him" into a tree and hurt him. The Jamaat leader claims that the victim "fell ill" amid the unrest.

The victim has been identified as Mohibuzzaman Kochi, 55, a former office secretary of the Khulna city unit of the BNP.

A total of 1,755 candidates from 50 political parties and 273 independents are contesting the election. The BNP has fielded the highest number of 291 candidates. There are 83 female candidates.

Yunus, who has promised to quickly transfer power to the elected government, has urged the political parties, candidates and other concerned parties to maintain restraint, tolerance and democratic behaviour on the polling day.

In a televised address to the nation on the eve of the polling, Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin called upon the voters to cast their votes freely. He urged political parties, candidates, and voters to maintain a peaceful and cordial environment.

He said that representatives from 45 countries and organisations, including election management bodies and international institutions, are observing the polls.

Election Commissioner Abdur Rahmani Machud said nearly 9,00,000 law enforcement personnel have been deployed to ensure security during the election, state-run BSS news agency reported.

Authorities have deployed Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) and Rapid Action Teams (RATs) across key areas of the capital.

Police said they have provided a list of risk-prone polling centres to the EC, which showed that out of 2,131 polling centres in Dhaka, 1,614 were risk-prone. However, the army said they have identified two centres in Dhaka city to be "risky".

For the first time, drones and body-worn cameras are being used for election security.

EC data showed that first-time voters made up some 3.58 per cent of the nearly 127 million voters.

For the first time, nearly 8,00,000 expatriate Bangladeshis, who have registered with the poll body, will be able to vote through an IT-based postal ballot system.

BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman has called upon all citizens to exercise their franchise by going to their respective polling stations and casting their votes for candidates of their choice.

In a Facebook post on Thursday, Rahman said, "Dear pro-democracy brothers and sisters, I request everyone to exercise their voting rights in a festive and peaceful environment. Vote for whomever you deem fit. Vote according to your own choice, and ensure your state rights and ownership."

"Insha'Allah, from tomorrow, your Members of Parliament will take on the responsibility of serving you. I will take on the duty of ensuring that every victorious candidate of the sheaf of paddy (Dhaner Shis) properly fulfills their responsibilities," he added.

Muhammad Yunus, chief adviser to the interim government, speaking to reporters after voting, described the day as one of "great joy," calling it "the birthday of the new Bangladesh."

In a midnight Facebook statement, Jamaat Ameer or chief Shafiqur Rahman called the incidents as "rumours" urging people to ignore them saying "dear countrymen, a 'laylatul gujo' (night of rumours) is underway, don't pay a heed to them".

Sheikh Hasina rejects election as 'voter-less farce'

Hasina in massive nationwide protests in August 2024. Hasina, 78, has been staying in India after she fled the country.

The statement, released by the Bangladesh Awami League and shared on the party's official X handle, expressed gratitude from Hasina, described as the "People's Leader," to citizens, including women and minority communities, for what it said was their rejection of a "so-called election" held without the participation of the Awami League.

"Today's so-called election by Yunus, who seized power illegally and unconstitutionally, was essentially a well-planned farce," the statement said, alleging that voting rights, democratic values and the spirit of the Constitution were completely disregarded in an election conducted in the absence of the country's largest political party.

Following the July 2024 mass uprising that led to the removal of the Awami League from power, the interim government imposed a ban on all activities of the party on May 12 last year.

Soon afterwards, the Election Commission suspended the party's registration.

The government has said the ban will remain in place until trials at the International Crimes Tribunal are completed.

As a result, the party, which governed Bangladesh for more than two decades across six separate terms, has been barred from contesting the election.

Pratham pooja on June 29; accidental insurance enhanced to Rs 10 lakh

dissemination of yatra-related information, insurance cover for ponies, extension of online and pre-paid services, registration of pilgrims, disaster preparedness & mitigation measures, adequate provisioning of medical care facilities, langar & volunteer services, telecommunication, grid connectivity, Weather Forecasting Infrastructure & Systems, security and surveillance; digital pre-paid system for hiring services, laying of crash barriers and safety railings along vulnerable stretches on both routes, and the progress achieved on various ongoing works undertaken by different departments.

Reviewing the maintenance, restoration and devel-

opment of yatra tracks by Border Roads Organisation, the board was informed that BRO had registered a significant progress, achieving comfortable track width on both Baltal and Pahalgam routes.

Mandeep K Bhandari, Chief Executive Officer, Shri Amarnath Ji Shrine Board, gave a detailed presentation regarding the arrangements for the upcoming yatra.

The meeting was attended by SASB members - Swami Avdheshanand Giri Ji Maharaj, Prof Kailash Mehra Sadhu, K K Sharma, K N Rai, Mukesh Garg, Dr Shailesh Raina, Dr Simridhi Bindroo, Suresh Haware and Prof Vishwamurti Shastri.

The meeting was also attended by Shri Atal Dulloo, Chief Secretary; Shri Shaleen Kabra, Additional Chief Secretary, Jal Shakti Department; Shri Shaileendra Kumar, Additional Chief Secretary, Power Development Department; Shri Nalin Prabhat, DGP; Shri Chandraker Bharti, Principal Secretary Home; Shri Santosh D. Vaidya, Principal Secretary, Finance; Administrative Secretaries; Divisional Commissioner Jammu; Divisional Commissioner Kashmir; IGP; Deputy Commissioners (Ganderbal and Anantnag); Additional CEO SASB and senior officers of the UT Administration, BRO and Shrine Board also attended the meeting, in person and through virtual mode, at Lok Bhavan Jammu.

BSF, Pak Rangers meet at RS Pura

erating their commitment to maintaining peace and stability along the border, the officials added.

Officials described the interaction as part of established mechanisms to address operational issues and avoid any misunderstanding.

Sexual harassment panel's mandate expanded

Rani vs Union of India and others.

The chief justice had directed that the existing Sexual Harassment Probe Committee would now also look into complaints of sexual harassment and related matters concerning transgender persons.

1,400 illegal structures demolished across J&K: Govt

formation in a written reply to a starred question by PDP legislator Mir Mohammad Fayaz.

The demolished structures included 1,194 residential and 231 commercial buildings, with Srinagar accounting for the highest number - 1,133 structures, including 119 commercial establishments - brought down by the J&K Lake Conservation and Management Authority, Srinagar Municipal Corporation and Srinagar Development Authority, chief minister Omar Abdullah, who is also minister in-charge Housing and Urban Development, said.

Jammu district recorded 237 demolitions, including 75 commercial structures, carried out by Jammu Development Authority, Jammu Municipal Corporation and revenue authorities followed by 19 in Ramban district by National Highway Authority of India, 10 in Anantnag by Pahalgam Development Authority, seven in Kathua and four in Shopian, Abdullah said.

He said three structures each were demolished in Kulgam, Ganderbal and Udhampur, two in Budgam and one each in Baramulla and Kupwara districts.

The commercial property in Baramulla and three houses in Ganderbal were demolished on the directions of the high court.

"The encroachments are regularly removed as per the provisions of J-K Public Premises (Eviction of Unauthorised Occupants) Act, 1988 and other relevant laws. Any unauthorised construction is dealt under rule, as per the provisions of Control Of Building Operations (COBO) Act, 1988. This is done on a regular basis by way of service of notices, conducting sealing and anti-encroachment/demolition drives," the chief minister said.

He said adequate time is accorded to the violator or encroacher as per the relevant section of J&K Public Premises Act and COBO Act.

Asked about the reasons for permitting construction of such structures in the first place, he said, "No such construction is permitted, without proper permission. However, in some cases, due to legal intervention, lack of timely police assistance, construction at odd hours and deviation from approved plans, delay occurs, due to which the offender succeeds in raising construction to the next level," he said.

'Safety first, production next' formula for nuclear power: Jitendra

plant.

During the Question Hour in the Rajya Sabha, AIADMK MP MThambidurai said the Kudankulam project got delayed due to safety concerns around it, and questioned the way its power is being distributed.

Singh said the share is determined through a formula, under which 50 per cent of the power is retained by the state, 35 per cent is given to the neighbouring states, and 15 per cent is sent to the national grid.

The minister also said that many apprehensions regarding the safety are because of "extraneous" and "political" reasons.

"Such apprehensions also arise sometimes because of extraneous reasons, political reasons... There has never been any such mishap. The formula we follow is 'Safety First, Production Next,'" he said.

"There was some issue raised that we will be storing waste fuel from all other reactors at Kudankulam. This was not based on scientific rationale," he added.

UN report flags JeM link to Red Fort attack

Kashmir. Founded in 2000, the group has been blamed for several high-profile attacks, including strikes on security forces and civilian targets. Its founder, Masood Azhar, has been under UN sanctions for years, including travel bans and asset freezes.

However, the Monitoring Team also highlighted divergent assessments among Member States regarding the group's current status. While some governments continue to flag JeM as active and operationally dangerous, another Member State reported that the organisation was defunct, underscoring persistent gaps in intelligence assessments and enforcement on the ground. Such discrepancies have long complicated international counter-terrorism cooperation in South Asia.

The UN report places the JeM developments within a broader picture of a complex and evolving terrorist threat landscape across Central and South Asia, where multiple extremist groups exploit regional instability, permissive environments and cross-border networks. The Monitoring Team warned that despite sustained counter-terrorism pressure, groups like JeM continue to demonstrate adaptability, whether through new recruitment models or symbolic, high-impact attacks.

Separately, the report noted that three terrorists involved in a separate attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir, were killed in July, reflecting ongoing security operations against terrorist networks in the region.

Taken together, the findings underscore the UN's concern that even as some terror outfits were weakened or fragmented, their ability to rebrand, reorganise and strike high-profile targets remains a serious threat to regional and international security.

Procurement of 114 Rafale jets cleared

came just four days ahead of French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to India.

However, a formal contract to seal the deal is unlikely before end of the year as the defence ministry will now have to carry out negotiations with Dassault Aviation to finalise the cost and finer details of the weapons package.

In April 2019, the the Indian Air Force issued an RFI (Request for Information), or initial tender to acquire 114 Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft (MRFA) at a cost of around USD 18 billion.

It was billed as one of the world's biggest military procurement programmes in recent years.

The other contenders for the mega project included Lockheed Martin's F-21, Boeing's F/A-18 and the Eurofighter Typhoon.

The move to procure the jets has come at a time when the number of the Indian Air Force's fighter squadrons have gone down to 31 from officially sanctioned strength of 42.

Nearly 13 years back, the defence ministry had completed ground work for procurement of a fleet of Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA).

However, the project didn't go through.

In 2015, the Modi government announced a government-to-government deal for 36 Rafale fighters in the face of rapidly declining squadron strength of the Indian Air Force (IAF).

The Indian Air Force currently operates these Rafale jets.

LA Speaker assures discussion on social media smear campaigns against MLAs

Pathania, education minister Sakeena Ittoo said DIPR had issued 28 rebuttals related to fake news and misinformation from April 1, 2025, to January 31, 2026. Of these, 20 were issued through press releases and eight through the department's official social media handles, she informed.

"The media monitoring cell continuously scans websites, news channels and social media platforms, and promptly issues rebuttals upon identifying misleading content," she said.

"However, the regulation or suspension of websites, digital platforms, online news channels or private fact checking units (FCUs) does not fall within the scope of the information department," she added.

Ittoo said all government departments had designated nodal officers to monitor department-specific fake news while imposition of fines against individuals, organisations or corporate entities for spreading fake news does not come under the purview of the information department.

Regarding cyber security preparedness, the minister said comprehensive multi-layered measures had been undertaken to strengthen digital infrastructure across departments.

NC legislators, and BJP's Sham Lal Sharma and Balwant Singh Mankotia also supported Pathania, pressing the chair to permit a discussion on what they described as a "serious issue", alleging sustained attempts by certain elements to tarnish the image of legislators and the House.

With members demanding accountability for those operating fake accounts and spreading defamatory material, the speaker directed the matter be listed separately for detailed discussion during the ongoing session.

"The concern raised by the members, in my view, is the concern of the entire House; someone's dignity is being tarnished," Itoo said.

The speaker said he had taken note of it, urging BJP MLAs to return their seats.

Earlier, Food and Supplies Minister Satish Sharma apologised for his remarks against Leader of Opposition Sunil Sharma and his uncle, BJP MLA Sham Lal Sharma, during a debate on Monday.

Oppn MPs protest against India-US trade agreement

government over the deal.

Earlier in the day, Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi alleged that the government ignored the voices of workers and farmers while making decisions concerning their future and asked whether Prime Minister Narendra Modi will listen to them now or if there is a "grip" on him too strong.

Gandhi's attack on the government came a day after he alleged that the India-US interim trade deal was a "wholesale surrender", with India's energy security handed over to America and farmers' interests compromised.

In a no-holds-barred attack on the Modi government, Gandhi, while participating in the debate on the Union Budget in the Lok Sabha on Wednesday, claimed that Indian interests had been "surrendered" under the trade deal to protect the BJP's financial architecture.

Slamming the Indo-US deal, Gandhi drew an analogy of how in martial arts after securing a grip, the next step is a chokehold, and then the opponent taps to give up.

Gandhi underlined the need to protect the country's people, data, food supply and energy system.

He said that had an INDIA bloc government negotiated the trade agreement with the US, it would have told President Donald Trump that he must treat India equally.

2 BJP MLAs stage walkout

munity members residing in Jammu and other plain areas.

Replying to the main question on the subject raised by Raina, Social Welfare Minister Sakeena Ittoo said the extension of Scheduled Tribe-II (ST-II) benefits, covering Pahari-speaking people among others, was based on ethnic identity and not on regional considerations.

"The ST-I reservation (for Gujjars and Bakerwals) stands implemented uniformly across the entire Union Territory of J&K. The reservation under the ST-II category is not region-based or area-specific but is given on the basis of Pahari ethnicity to various groups," she said.

Responding to a query on whether the government intends to extend ST-II reservation benefits to persons belonging to the Pahari ethnic group residing in Jammu to uphold constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination, the minister said the policy is consistent with constitutional principles of equality, fairness, and non-discrimination.

The issue also triggered a heated exchange between the BJP members and National Conference MLA Aijaz Jan, who strongly opposed any extension of reservation benefits to Pahari families residing outside the hilly belts.

Talking to reporters, Raina questioned the government's stand, saying that if members of Scheduled Tribe (ST-I) are entitled to reservation benefits irrespective of where they reside, the same principle should apply to Pahari-speaking people.

He argued that geographical area should not be made a criterion for extending the benefits.

Committed to comprehensive development of Ladakh: Kavinder

the LG about the forthcoming 4th edition of the marathon, scheduled to commence on February 24, with participation from runners across the country.

They also shared details regarding the recognition and growing prominence of the event.

Delegations from Lingshed and Chumathang apprised Gupta of local developmental issues and tourism-related initiatives in their respective areas. The Chumathang delegation highlighted the significance of the Chumathang Hot Springs as a tourism destination.

A group of unemployed veterinary graduates also met him and raised issues related to their professional concerns.

Hussain, a visually impaired citizen, also called on the LG and shared his personal concerns and those of his daughter, who is also visually impaired.

The LG gave a patient hearing to all the delegations and reiterated the UT administration's commitment to inclusive development and promoting Ladakh as a major tourism destination.

"Ladakh possesses immense untapped potential in adventure and wellness tourism, as well as renewable energy," he said and emphasised the importance of coordinated efforts to harness these opportunities.

EU leaders meet to counter pressure from Russia, China, Trump

"Yet it sometimes feels like we're standing on the bridge of the ship staring at the horizon without being able to touch the helm."

There are competing visions of how the EU should navigate these troubled times. Thursday's meeting is to shape proposals for another summit in late March.

Before crossing a drawbridge to the 16th-century Alden Biesen castle, leaders told reporters they were focused on competitiveness and economic security.

"We need to continue our very proactive trade policy and protect our companies from unfair competition, from economic coercion," said European Council President António Costa just before the meeting started. He highlighted energy costs and cutting bureaucratic barriers to trade.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni lead a wing of the bloc calling for deregulation, rebooting Europe's relationship with Washington and forging trade deals like the recent one struck with the Mercosur nations of South America.

Macron is renewing his call for the EU to be able to borrow money, which he described as "Eurobonds for the future" that would provide an opportunity "to challenge the hegemony of the dollar."

Merz and Meloni are following an economic stimulus strategy called for by Mario Draghi, former head of the European Central Bank. The plan includes cutting regulations, making infrastructure investments and establishing trade ties with more countries. Draghi will address leaders assembled in the castle.

"We have way too many barriers that prevent money and capital from moving from one country to another, way too many obstacles to simplification," said Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament. "No more words, but more action."

Germany and Italy are expected to call on leaders to act by cutting EU red tape, strengthening the single market and "ensuring an ambitious trade policy based on shared rules and a level playing field."

That echoes the economic security focus of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who like Merz and Metsola is a leading figure in the European People's Party, which is the largest bloc in the European Parliament and claims 13 heads of EU states as members.

"Our power on the global stage depends greatly on our strength on the economic front," she said in a speech Wednesday.

Citizens across the bloc are hungry for a stronger EU and a more unified, stronger and ambitious leadership amid military threats, economic pressures and climate instability, according to an official EU poll, Eurobarometer.

"There has never been a better time for European leaders, national political leaders, to actually leverage on these European citizens' demand for greater European action," said Alberto Alemanno, a professor of EU law at the HEC Paris business school.

Peace, tranquility on border discussed, says MEA

membership," Jaiswal added.

According to a statement from the MEA, the two sides exchanged views on a wide range of issues across bilateral, regional, and international affairs, with discussions primarily focusing on recent progress in stabilising and rebuilding bilateral ties and on ways to advance engagement.

Both sides reiterated their commitment to implement their leaders' guidance, including the need to approach bilateral issues, particularly trade-related concerns, from a political and strategic perspective.

"Both sides underscored the importance of peace and tranquility in the border areas for overall progress in bilateral relations. They reiterated their commitment to implement the guidance provided by their leaders, including on the need to proceed from a political and strategic direction to approach issues and concerns related to bilateral trade," the statement said.

During the dialogue, Foreign Secretary Misri noted the successful resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra and expressed hope for its continued expansion.

Both sides also recognised the need to conclude an updated Air Services Agreement at an early stage and agreed to continue taking practical steps to facilitate visa processing and promote people-to-people exchanges.

The discussions also covered multilateral cooperation, including during India's BRICS Chairmanship this year.

"The Chinese side expressed its support for a successful BRICS Summit in India. EVFM also conveyed that China understands and respects India's aspirations for UNSC membership," the MEA added.

Working to bring 'misguided' J&K youth into national mainstream: MoS

this, whatever the Opposition may say'.

"You have always come in the way and created hurdles. But our purpose is to save the youth of Jammu and Kashmir and provide them with new employment," she said.

"The Modi government is working to take Jammu and Kashmir forward with different schemes," Karandlaje said.

"For the first time, Jammu and Kashmir Bank has given nearly Rs 14,490 cr under the credit guarantee scheme. This is the highest in the country, she said and added, "We have also created nine separate clusters for the manufacture of cricket bats in Jammu and Kashmir."

"I can give you one example, when I met a girl on a flight, she said that in the country's history, a prime minister is thinking about the children of Jammu and Kashmir," she noted.

PM Modi was present in the Rajya Sabha during the Question Hour.

The minister said, "Our government is working towards bringing formalisation of jobs for the youth of Jammu and