



UNITED NATIONS ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE SECRETARIAT
(SUPPORTED AND COORDINATING INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSIONS)



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

STATEMENT BY THE INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION
COUNTRY DELEGATIONS
BANGLADESH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS
OCTOBER 1, 2001

October 2, 2001

The United Nations Electoral Assistance Secretariat (UNEAS) has been providing coordination and supporting services to the international delegations currently in the country observing the electoral process in Bangladesh. As part of these services, the international country delegations requested UNEAS to release the following statement:

By invitation of the Caretaker Government and the Election Commission of Bangladesh, several countries and international organizations send delegations to observe the electoral process in the country, which culminated with the parliamentary elections on October 1, 2001.

The international election observation delegations of Canada, Japan, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Russia, Thailand, and the United States, supported by a group of local Embassy staff and expatriates volunteers, deployed a total of 92 observing in the country, divided up in 8 sub-regions: Chittagong, Sirajganj, Khulna, Sylhet, Rangpur, Barisal, Noakhali, and Dhaka. The observers visited before and during Election Day the majority of the constituencies on those sub-regions, and observed the set-up and opening of the polling centers, voting, closing of the polling centers, counting, and consolidation of results.

In that context, and based on the information received from the observers up to this morning, the delegations would like to remark the following:

- the majority (92.7%) of the polling centers visited was functioning and opened on time (or within 15 minutes before or after 8:00 AM). Also in its majority, all members of the polling stations were present, and in very few cases were unauthorized persons present inside the polling stations. Secrecy of the vote was strictly observed, and with a very few exceptions all voters had the finger marked with indelible ink. In some of the polling stations, some essential electoral material was missing.
- acts of violence and some serious incidents were reported by or to the observers. One person was reported killed and five injured in Munshigonj in a clash between Awami League and BNP supporters. Two persons were killed and around 100 injured in Barisal (Bakergonj). A. S. M. Abdur Robb, a JSD candidate, was arrested for anti-social behavior in Laximpur. More than 200 voters complained they had been obstructed to vote by party

agents in Feni, but were able to cast their votes later with the help of the law enforcement agencies. In Noakhali, some party supporters stole ballot boxes. In other constituencies of the country, party supporters tried to assault a polling station; observers reported that at some polling centers voters belonging to ethnic minorities were deprived of their right to vote, and a party leader presence created some trouble in a polling station where he was casting his vote. Countrywide, however, the law enforcement agencies were able to establish, and to reestablish, order.

- despite such incidents, and of poor facilities and overcrowding in some polling stations, voters were able to exercise their franchise. Opening of the polling centers and voting were, in general, considered smooth.
- few situations demanding suspension of voting were reported by the observers.
- although some cases of intimidation were registered both inside and outside of the polling stations visited by the observers, voters were free to cast their votes in the majority of the polling centers observed by the delegations.
- all the polling centers visited by the observers closed around 4:00 PM. In one-third of those polling centers there were voters in line at the time of closing. However, all of them were able to vote. Correct procedures for counting were observed in all polling centers visited, although not in all of them the presiding officer announced the total number of ballot papers before counting them.
- Domestic observers were identified at half of the polling centers visited by the observers.

Conclusions:

The general assessment by the observers of the opening of polling centers, voting, closing of the polling centers, and counting was "good", and that the elections proceeded smoothly.

The observers also noted a high participation of women in the voting, despite the hardships presented by small and overcrowded polling stations. Although a few, sporadic, and regrettable incidents of violence were reported, and irregularities during voting were observed, the overall impact on the elections was according to the established procedures, and polling agents signed the statement of counting in all polling centers visited by the observers. Consequently, the delegations agreed that the polling on October 1, 2001 was generally free, fair, peaceful, and orderly.

However, the peaceful and orderly manner that marked Election Day was marred by the regrettable and unfortunate acts of violence and threats of information during the 75 days before the elections. It is the hope of the delegations that the overall atmosphere of Election Day remains and prevails in the days ahead, and that all involved in the electoral process - government, electoral officials, political organizations, and citizens in general - will replace past attitudes of confrontation by one of dialogue, in support of democracy in Bangladesh.

Polling station officials have displayed professionalism for the most part and appeared to be generally familiar with required procedures. The elections were generally well organized and managed in a satisfactory way, although a number of administrative problems beset the process and, in some cases, prevented citizens from voting. Some of these difficulties were due to overcrowded polling centers, late identification of new polling centers, and a problematic partisan vote number verification system.

The delegations wish to congratulate the people of Bangladesh for their stoicism and high civic spirit, and for their peaceful, orderly, and enthusiastic participation. The presence of the law enforcement agencies was essential for a peaceful and orderly election. The delegations also wish to commend the efforts of the officials in charge of organizing the elections and those responsible for its execution, and praise the balanced electoral coverage by the media. A special thanks goes to the people of Bangladesh, for its kind and warm reception of all observers.

For the delegations of:

Canada, Nigeria, Norway, Japan, Pakistan, Russia, Thailand, and the United States.