



Statement on Election Violence

Dates Covered: 14-24 December 2008

The Odhikar Election Violence Education and Resolution (EVER) project in Bangladesh, built on a network of monitors in 40 districts, aims to provide accurate and timely data on patterns of election violence to the public, political parties, election and security officials, and other stakeholders in Bangladesh to help them develop strategies to mitigate such incidents.¹ Odhikar is focusing its EVER monitoring activities in 40 districts under 6 divisions that have a history of election-related violence in Bangladesh. Two monitors work in each of the 40 districts. Odhikar EVER monitors are responsible for identifying and gathering key information on incidents of election-related violence within each district, as well as tensions, potential for violence, and peace initiatives.

Introduction

This statement on election violence is a combination of two monitoring periods, covering 14-19 and 20-24 December 2008 respectively. It is issued by the Odhikar EVER project, and covers the political campaign leading to the 29 December 2008 National Elections. 74 incidents of election-related violence were recorded and verified by EVER monitors during this period. The following districts were monitored:

Name of the Division	Name of the District
Dhaka	Gazipur, Munshigonj, Narayangonj, Mymensingh, Rajbari, Kishoregonj, Tangail and Netrokona
Chittagong	Brahmanbaria, Comilla, Feni, Laxmipur, Noakhali, Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Rangamati and Bandarban.
Rajshahi	Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Dinajpur, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Gaibandha, Chapainawabganj, Naogaon, Rajshahi, Pabna and Sirajgonj.
Khulna	Khulna, Satkhira, Jessore, Jhenaidah and Kushtia.
Barisal	Barisal, Patuakhali, Jhalokati and Pirojpur.
Sylhet	Sunamgonj, Sylhet and Moulavibazar.

The law enforcement agencies categorized about 25 thousand polling centers as vulnerable out of 35,216 centers of the country. Among them, about 80% of the polling stations are vulnerable in 188 constituencies of Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna divisions. In total, more than 70% of the polling centers are recorded as being vulnerable. A list of vulnerable polling centers has already been delivered to the Returning Officers and District Election Offices. About 1500 polling centers, out of 1860 in the 16 constituencies of Chittagong district were considered vulnerable. Among its upazilas, Nazirhat, Fatikchhari, Raujan, Hathajari are marked as more violence prone areas. In Khulna, out of 707 polling centers of 6 constituencies, 75% centers were found to be risky. The Ministry of Home Affairs has decided, in consultation with the Election Commission, to deploy the Army, Bangladesh Rifles, Coastguard, Rapid Action Battalion, and Armed Police as striking forces in all vulnerable places as indicated. Though the State of Emergency was lifted on 17th December 2008, the army has been deployed all over the country from 20 December, and they have been patrolling as striking force since then.

In the upcoming election, the provision of 'no vote' has generated great interest among informed voters. Various kinds of awareness campaigns regarding the 'no vote' option have already commenced

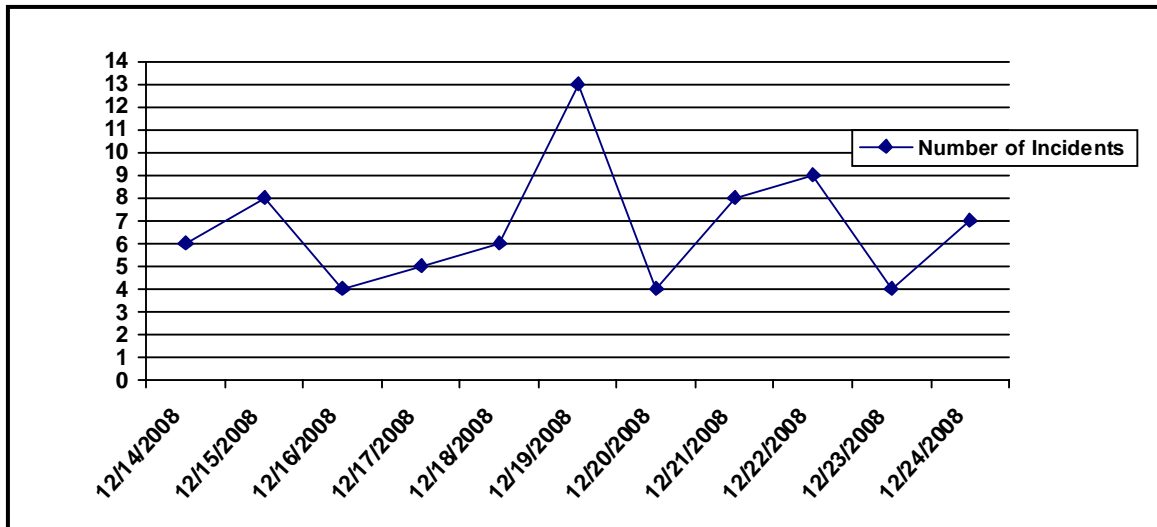
¹ Within the EVER framework, "election-related violence" refers to any violence (harm) or threat of violence (harm) that is aimed at disrupting any part of the electoral or political process during the election period. Election violence generally involves political parties, their supporters, journalists, agents of the government, election administrators and the general population, and includes threats, assault, murder, destruction of property, and physical or psychological harm. An "incident" of election violence refers to any act that 1) has a specific victim(s) and perpetrator(s) and occurs within a limited timeframe and location; 2) meets the definition of election-related violence; and 3) has been verified by monitors using at least two different sources of information. Please contact Odhikar with methodological details, questions, or feedback.

nationwide. Several NGOs are playing an important role in this issue. They have been campaigning about the 'no vote' on media talk shows. Apart from that, the United People's Democratic Front in Rangamati, is actively campaigning for voters to cast a 'no vote' because the Election Commission did not register them as a political party. The Election Commission also started a media campaign about the provision of the 'no vote' to let people know the merits and demerits of this provision. It is hoped that this new system may increase the number of voters' attendance in the election. The Election Commission has introduced this provision on the ballot paper first time in Bangladesh voting history. If more than 50% of the total votes cast goes under 'no vote' in a constituency, no one will be declared elected, and hence there will be re-polling in the area.

Key Findings

- Of the 40 monitored districts, the total number of incidents of election-related violence recorded from 14-24 December 2008 was 74.
- In total, **202 people were wounded** in the recorded incidents during the period from 14 to 24 December, and there were no deaths in any reported incident. A total of 56 persons were recorded as wounded in Chittagong division, 47 in Dhaka, 36 in Sylhet, 28 in Rajshahi, 18 in Khulna and 17 in Barisal divisions.
- It has been seen that supporters/activists of the four party alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) „and grand alliance led by the Awami League were active participants in many of the incidents of violence. Both the alliances were among the perpetrators in over two-thirds of the incidents reported in this period.
- Chittagong and Dhaka divisions have the highest number of incidents possibly because they are the two main cities in the country. During this period Chittagong had the highest number of incidents reported (19 incidents), while Dhaka and Rajshahi were placed as second with 13 incidents each. Sylhet and Khulna division had fewer incidents, and the lowest number of incidents were recorded in Barishal division (9 incidents).
- It is notable that police were recorded as perpetrators only in two incidents recorded during this reporting period. Law enforcement agencies were found to be active and tolerant in the vast majority of the monitored areas. Police response has improved during the State of Emergency.
- In 10 districts out of 40, there was no election related violence recorded during this reporting period. Narayangonj, Tangail, Netrokona, Comilla, Feni, Bandarban, Panchagarh, Lalmonirhat, Gaibandha, Chapainawabganj were found to be very peaceful.
- Analysis of monitors' reports from more peaceful versus relatively violent districts cover during this reporting period indicates that the proactive presence of security forces can reduce the potential for violence during rallies, processions and other mass gatherings, and that political leaders' denouncement of violence can have a large impact on supporters in their communities.

Figure 1. Number of Incidents by Date



Detailed Findings

The following are specific examples of incidents or events covering 14-24 December 2008.

- Allegations of violation of the Election Code of Conduct have been reported frequently from the monitoring districts. The inquiry committee of the Election Commission received evidence of violations of the Code of Conduct regarding 22 candidates from different constituencies. The inquiry committee submitted an investigation report with specific information and evidence before the Election Commission. Among the accused candidates 8 are from the Awami League, 7 from BNP, 2 from Jatiyo Party (E), one each from Bicolpodhara and NAP and 2 are independent candidates. The allegations have been made and investigated under section 12 of the RPO².
- Along with the Four Party and Grand Alliance most of the political parties were involved in violating the election Code of Conduct randomly in the monitoring area. Almost all the political parties are involved in conducting rallies on the street, disrupting people, using megaphones the whole day for campaigning, political graffiti on walls, poster on the walls, provocative speeches etc. In Sylhet district, colour posters of the four party alliance candidate were pasted in various parts of Sylhet-1 constituency, while in Sylhet-3 constituency, a lot of wall writing was seen in favour of the Grand Alliance candidate and colour posters for the Jatiyo Party candidate were found in the same constituency. Similarly, there were also violation of election Code of Conduct found in Rajshahi, Jessore, Pirojpur, Netrokona, Brahminbaria and Chapainawabgong³.
- There were also allegations of vote buying found in Dinajpur and Laxmipur districts. Activists of the four party alliance in Dinajpur-3 constituency allegedly distributed one kg of rice and 2 kg of beef door to door in the name of 'islamic relief'. While Bicolpodhara candidate in Laxmipur-4 constituency allegedly distributed saree, warm cloths and cash to the voters of his area.

² RPO: Representation of People Order, 1972 (As Ammended to 2008)

³ According to sections 11(a), 13, 7 of the election Code of Conduct, provocative speeches, coloured campaign posters and graffiti are illegal and the use of the loudspeaker/ megaphone is allowed only from 1400 hrs – 2000 hrs.

- Despite of having a lot of complaints / allegations, the Election Commission did not take any active measures.
- The United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) has been conducting a 'no vote' campaign in the Rangamati constituency since 17 December 2008. Four UPDF members were abducted from Rangamati town while campaigning for 'no vote' on 20 December 2008. The security personnel arrested five activists of UPDF, a CHT based political organisation of the ethnic minority people, from two separate places for conducting a 'no vote' campaign. The UPDF, which is opposed to the activities of the Parbottyo Chottogram Jono Shanghoti Shomity (PCJSS) since the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts peace treaty in 1997, decided to stamp 'no vote' on the ballot for the Rangmati constituency. The UPDF could not file its candidate to contest for the constituency as the Election Commission refused to register UPDF as a political party for the 9th parliamentary election.
- The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) recovered three improvised hand grenades from Comilla, around an hour after BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia addressed an election rally just a kilometer away. It was reported that the RAB personnel also arrested two JMB⁴ members and seized a 10kg bomb from a JMB den at Nabiabad in Comilla. The BNP Chief later alleged that the grenades seized had been brought to assassinate her, and disrupt the upcoming national election.
- The four party alliance made allegations against the Election Commission for favouring a particular political party, which might have an impact on the election results. They are concerned about possible election engineering and rigging, terming it as a hurdle for conducting polls in a free, fair and neutral manner. BNP joint Secretary General, Mirza Abbas made this allegation at a press briefing on 22 December in the Gulshan BNP office.
- Two government officials allegedly participated at a rally organised by four party alliance in Brahminbaria. The rally was presided over by Md. Fazlur Rahman, Deputy Assistant Health Officer, Health and Family Welfare Center of Satmora Union, Brahminbaria while Assistant Engineer (Local Government and Engineering Department) Ali Azhar was present as moderator at the rally.
- High levels of tension⁵ were found in Cox's Bazar district during the monitoring period between December 20 and 24. Mid levels of instability were prevailing in 15 districts. Tearing down posters, provocative speeches, verbal personal attacks created unrest and, in a few areas, violation of election Code of Conduct mainly created mid levels of instability. However, in 19 districts, low levels of instability prevailed and in Bandorban, the situation was quite peaceful.

⁴ JMB: Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh, a banned organization that preaches extremist politics.

⁵ **Tension level: High** (Openly violent, violence occurred more than 3 days in a week).

Tension level: Medium (people on the street can be heard arguing, or party supporters are tearing down posters, or protest are occurring frequently, potential for violence is high, people have changed their routines due to security concerns)

Tension level: Low (people may be discussing politics or problems or concerns, but potential for violence seems low, people are going about their daily routines)

Situation is Calm (there is little political argument, people are comfortable about security, routines are normal)

Peace initiatives

In 24 of the monitored areas (Feni, Gaibandha, Sylhet, Tangail, Satkhira, Rajshahi, Pabna, Panchagarh, Jessore, Mymensingh, Patuakhali, Gazipur, Khulna, Banbarban, Netrokona, Thakurgaon, Kurigram, Noakhali, Cox's Bazar, Moulavibazar, Sirajgonj, Kishorgonj, Rangamati, Chapainawabgonj), peace initiatives were taken by the government, various non-political cultural groups, political parties and civil society. In the mentioned areas, District and Upazila level government and election officials organized meetings with all political party members and local government officials for peaceful rallies and processions during the campaign period. This kind of initiatives have educated party supporters and voters as well for reducing violence. In the remaining 13 districts, there was no peace initiatives observed. It is to be mentioned that civil society organizations, Shushasoner Jonno Nagorik (Sujon), NRDS, TIB, ADD Nagorik Moitry Committee, Naripokkho, Coastal NGO forum, Shushasoner Jonno Procharabhijan (SUPRO) were found to be active in peace initiatives.

Impact of Violence

A total of 202 people were reported as having been wounded in the incidents during the period from 14-24 December 2008. The highest number was in Chittagong where 56 were wounded, while 47 were wounded in Dhaka, 36 in Sylhet, and 28 in Rajshahi.

More than 56% of the recorded incidents resulted in interference with campaign activities during this reporting period. In addition to the destruction of property, the incidents of violence recorded during this period resulted in physical harm due to the fact that most of the incidents involved clashes between rival groups of political party supporters, and the fact that these supporters used weapons to cause the large number of injuries resulting from the violence.

Recommendations

- All political parties should refrain from personal attacks on each other and should refrain from delivering provocative speeches.
- All candidates and political parties must follow the Code of Conduct and the Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972.
- The Election Commission and the Returning Officers should take immediate action against all reported incidents of violations of Code of Conduct as per RPO.
- Law enforcement agencies need to be proactive in handling violent situations. Police should increase efforts to maintain law and order during rallies and meetings in the interest of preventing violence, however, they should refrain from using excessive force.
- All political parties should publicly condemn the use of violence by their supporters, and should state their commitment to non-violence. All political parties should be encouraged to come together to discuss the potential for violence, and consider the development of a public code of conduct or commitment to non-violent activism and campaigning.

Conclusions

Odhikar believes that election-related violence increases fear and decreases the participation of citizens in the election process specifically and the democratic processes in general. Analysis of trends reported in both peaceful and violent districts shows that actions by both political party leaders and security officials can have a positive impact on reducing violence. Findings also indicate that when political party leaders feel pressure to reduce violence, they respond. Therefore raising public awareness of the need to pressure party leaders could be very helpful. Given that the level of competition between and within parties is likely to rise as elections approach, it is all the more important to take more action now to encourage nonviolent campaigning and activism.