

Iraq attack 11-party calls half-day hartal today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The left leaning 11-Party alliance has called a half-day countrywide hartal today in protest against the US invasion of Iraq.

Different political parties also supported the hartal and gave statements yesterday urging the people to make it successful.

The Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) in a statement called upon the people to observe the hartal to show their opposition to the US invasion of Iraq.

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) held a rally in the city in support of the hartal. Speakers there said the US aggression on Iraq is an attack on all peace loving and independent nations. The US imperialism has to be resisted, they said.

Bangladesh Samnyabadi Dal hoped that the people of Bangladesh will express their solidarity with the Iraqi people by observing the hartal.

Bangladesh Chartra Union said it is the responsibility of every conscious person to oppose the aggression on Iraq.

The Committee for Preparation of Rally and Procession Against War in a statement said the people of Bangladesh are with the peoples of the world against the 'unjust war'.

It urged the people to join anti-war demonstrations till the war is stopped.

The Anti-imperialism Forum, a newly formed organisation to protest the US invasion, will organise a rally today at the Muktangan in the city.

Among others, Bangladesh Jatiya Dal, Hak Kothar Mancha, Gonotantrik Biplobi Jote, Jatiya Gono Front, Biplobi Oyko Front, Gonotantrik Majdur Party, Gonsanghati Andolon and Bangladesh Krishak Sramink Andolon also supported the hartal.

Anti-war protest in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A big crowd chanting slogans for peace and carrying anti-US banners gathered at the city's Paltan Maidan yesterday and marched through the streets protesting invasion of Iraq.

The protesters, also carrying replicas of tanks, missiles and effigy of Bush, shouted slogans against the US government for unleashing the unjust war and vowed to wage Jihad against the aggressors.

The rally also expressed its support to the half-day countrywide hartal today, called by left leaning parties protesting the invasion. It was organised by the Islamic Law Implementation Committee after the Jumma prayer.

Speakers at the rally said the people of Bangladesh are not against the people of the US and the UK but against their warmonger governments.

They called for boycott of American and British products.

Mufti Fazlul Haq Amini MP, Secretary General of Islami Oikya Jote, a component of the ruling four-party alliance, said the war is for Iraq's oil by ousting its legitimate government.

The US government has launched a false propaganda against the Iraqi government to install a puppet administration there.

He called upon all political parties to express their opposition to the war and solidarity with fellow Muslim country Iraq.

Most of the participants in the rally and the procession were madrassah students from different parts of the city and also from outside.

"The rally symbolises only one idea: No war. We want peace", 14 year-old Sohrab Hossain told this

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Table with prayer timings for Mar 22, including Sun Rises, Sun Sets, Azan, and Jamaat.

Steps to allow private sector to develop, operate land ports

REAZ AHMAD, back From Hilli Border, Dinajpur

The government has started the process of implementing its recent decision of allowing private sector to develop and operate 12 out of the 13 land ports in the country.

Official sources said floating of tender for this would begin by May this year. The job would involve investment of about Tk 120 crore.

To expedite the process, Chairman of the Bangladesh Land Port Authority (BLPA) Sharif Atiqur Rahman last week visited some of the land ports bordering India and Myanmar. The visit took him to Hilli and Biral in Dinajpur, Burimari in

Lalmoinrhat and Sona Masjid in Chapainawabganj.

The BLPA chairman hoped that private investors would develop required facilities including warehouses and infrastructure for customs and immigration within a single security enclosure. This would help make cargo handling and import-export activities hassle-free and also reduce cross-border smuggling, he thought.

About revenue earning, he said, "We will work out some sort of arrangements with the private developers of land ports."

While visiting Hilli on Tuesday to see the 25 acres of land acquired there for development of the land port, Sharif told reporters that 12

land ports would be handed over to private sector for handling import and export of cargo on build-operate-transfer (BOT) basis. The government would reserve the right to get back the operational authority over these ports after 25 years.

The 12 land ports are at Sona Masjid, Hilli, Burimari, Banglabandha, Biral, Bhomra, Darshana, Tamabil, Bibibazar, Akhaura, Haluaghat and Teknaf.

The Benapole land port would continue to be operated by the government.

A superintendent at Hilli Customs

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PM back from Myanmar

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia returned home yesterday afternoon from Yangon, winding up her three-day official visit to the Union of Myanmar.

Ministers, chiefs of the three services, diplomats and senior civil and military officials received her at the VVIP tarmac of the Zia International Airport as she alighted from a regular Biman flight.

The prime minister visited the neighbouring country at the invitation of Myanmar Prime Minister and Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council Senior General Than Shwe.

Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan, Communications Minister Barrister Nazmul Huda and Commerce Minister Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, who among others accompanied the prime ministers, also returned home in the afternoon.

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Prime Minister Khaleda Zia visits the Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar Thursday. She returned home yesterday afternoon, winding up her three-day official visit to Yangon.

Onions turn triply costly

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Onion prices have registered a sharp rise in the last two weeks.

Retailers have blamed wholesalers for creating an artificial onion crisis through hoarding.

Onion is selling at Tk 16 to 20 per kg in kitchen markets in the city, depending on the quality. Two weeks ago the price was Tk 6 to 8 per kg.

The wholesalers said that the price has increased as the season of 'Murikatta', a local variety of onion was over.

They claimed that the price would have been even higher if imported Indian onions were not in the market.

They believe that the US Iraq war might push the prices further up, as onion is also imported from Holland and Australia.

However, they hope that the prices will drop when 'Hali', another local variety, will come to the market after a month.

The wholesalers denied the allegation of hoarding onion. "It is not easy to stock onion for its perishable nature" said Dinesh, a wholesaler of Shyambazar kitchen market.

However, the retailers have blamed the wholesalers for the price hike.

"A month ago, I bought onion at Tk 150 per maund which suddenly rose to Tk 500 per maund a week after" said Rabiul, a retailer in Mohakhali kitchen market. "To make extra profits, the wholesalers stock the locally produced onions and create an artificial crisis" he added.

15 injured in post-polls violence in Barisal

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barisal

At least 15 people were injured in post-election violence between supporters of the winners and the losers in the Barisal City Corporation election held on Thursday.

Police detained 13 people from different areas of the city as the two sides clashed amid rejection of polls results by the defeated mayoral and ward commissioner candidates, alleging massive rigging in the election.

The ruling alliance-backed mayoral candidate Mujibur Rahman Sarwar won the polls race as alliance cadres 'controlled more than two dozen polling stations,' especially in the newly extended BCC area, his nearest rival Enayet Pir Khan said.

Addressing a press conference yesterday, Enayet said the home minister's 'presence in the show-down for Sarwar' and the 'confusion' created centring deployment of army in election duty were part of a blue print to make him win the election.

Two other mayoral candidates - Ebadul Huq chan and Ahsan Habib Kamal - also alleged that more than 10 polling centres were controlled by Sarwar's supporters and false votes were cast in his favour.

Statistics do not back govt claim of peaceful UP polls

NAZRUL ISLAM

NEWS ANALYSIS

The government claim of 'smooth and peaceful' Union Parishad (UP) elections which ended on March 16 is not based on statistics and it is 'politically motivated' to hide its responsibility of refusing to deploy army to maintain security during the polls, sources said.

The number of deaths in this year's polls related violence is almost three times that in the 1997 UP elections. Besides, people injured in polls violence this time were nearly 18 times the figure that year.

On March 16, Haris Chowdhury, political secretary to the prime minister, claimed, "no local body elections were held more smoothly, neutrally and peacefully in the history of Bangladesh."

Chowdhury, who had questioned the Chief Election Commissioner's authority to decide on troops deployment, also said the smooth holding of the UP

polls once again proved that the government respects democratic norms, institutions and people's mandate.

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) MA Syed had repeatedly asked for deployment of army during the UP polls to avert violence. But the government refused to do so, saying there was no such instance.

A total of 81 people were killed and over 7000 injured during the UP polls this year, staggered over two months.

During the 1997 polls, staggered over a month, 221 incidents of violence left 31 people killed and 397 injured.

Over 500 incidents of polls violence this year created a sense of insecurity among the voters,

reducing their turnout to 81.19 per cent from 83 per cent in 1997.

Various quarters feel that deployment of army could prove very effective in handling the situation.

But the government withdrew troops, who were already engaged in a countrywide anti-crime drive, only 10 days ahead of the UP polls.

Candidates in the UP polls in different areas had filed complaints with the Election Commission (EC), alleging that armed cadres of the ruling party backed by powerful quarters had captured many polling stations, snatched ballot papers and ballot boxes.

In such a situation, the CEC suspended voting in many stations. But he said there was no rule to abandon the election and that he had to hold it amid adversities.

This time some 55,000 public representatives in the lowest tier of

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PHOTO: STAR

Paramilitary BDR personnel stand guard in front of the Sheraton Hotel yesterday, as security was tightened around posh hotels, embassies and foreign banks in Dhaka in the wake of the US-led war on Iraq.

Fatal flu virus still remains a mystery

NAIMUL HAQ

A disease that has sent alert across the world is still unidentified, said the executive director of the communicable disease programme of World Health Organisation (WHO) yesterday.

"We have not been able to identify the virus that is causing Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)," Dr David Heymann told The Daily Star over phone from the WHO headquarters in Switzerland.

"But we know close contact with the infected person can lead to serious illness," he said.

Dr Heymann has been investigating the causes of the disease classified as SARS since last February and travelled to China and Vietnam, two of the most affected areas.

"After we came back from China and Vietnam we have sent a global alert and have been working in close collaboration with 11 laboratories across the world to identify the virus."

He suggested that any suspected case should be kept in isolation as a precautionary measure.

Asked if there is any indication from the laboratories, Heymann

said, "The class or family the virus belongs to has been identified and from this we know it quickly causes severe illness, especially breathing problem with high fever and dry cough."

The Centre for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention in Atlanta, USA suggested precautions for the airport authorities to minimise the risk of exposure to the virus.

Travellers from Hong Kong, Guangdong province of China and Vietnam are given health alert notices that they may have been exposed to SARS, said the CDC in a

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BTV to go satellite in six months

MUSTAK HOSSAIN

The state-run Bangladesh Television (BTV) will launch satellite transmission in six months, said sources in the information ministry yesterday.

"With the launch of satellite broadcast, overseas viewers will be able to watch BTV programmes," said a ministry official.

The BTV may switch to 24-hour transmission after introduction of the satellite band, said Director General of the BTV Mustafizur Rahman. The BTV now transmits programmes 12 hours on terrestrial band.

"We are thinking of bringing changes to programmes to make them interesting and cater to the

expatriates community," said Rahman.

Coverage of areas by the BTV satellite transmission depends on service providers, said Rahman.

"We hope it would cover Asia, Europe and part of North America."

The government will provide Tk 7.70 crore from its revenue budget to the project.

Earlier, the Spanish government had offered soft loans to finance the project. But the Bangladesh government did not accept the offer, as it was costly, officials said.

The Spanish offer has delayed satellite transmission for about a year, the sources alleged.

"The government is committed

to giving authentic information to its citizens abroad, who are contributing to the economy with remittance." Information Secretary Nazmul Alam Siddiqi told The Daily Star.

The satellite transmission would help build a positive image of Bangladesh abroad, said Siddiqi.

Funds will be spent on purchase of two satellite-news gathering (SNGs) equipment and hiring of satellite bandwidth, said the officials. SNG is a device which uplinks multimedia programmes via satellite.

One of the SNGs will be transportable and capable of telecasting live programmes and the other will be stationed at the BTV earth sta

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PHOTO: STAR

Star singer Adnan Sami speaks at a press conference at the Sheraton Hotel yesterday ahead of his live concert at the Army Stadium today.

Adnan Sami's concert today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A live concert of star singer Adnan Sami will be held today at the Army Stadium in the city.

The concert scheduled to be held yesterday was postponed for security reasons.

Swapan Chowdhury, head of Antar Showbiz Limited, organiser of the event, announced the new schedule at a press conference yesterday.

Adnan Sami and representatives of Pepsi and Asiatic were present at the press conference at the Sheraton Hotel.

18 months after general election Brutalised villagers in Bhola yet to be rehabilitated

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barisal

The government did not come forward to rehabilitate the poor, brutalised villagers of Annada Prashad, Bhola, even one and a half years after incidents of post-election violence.

A gang attacked villagers after the last general election in October 2001. The gangsters destroyed over 200 houses, raped women and children and looted valuables. The Hindus of the village were the worst victims.

Only the Nagarik Odhikar Sangrakkhan O Sampradaikata Protirodh Committee in association with Proshika, a non-governmental organisation, has extended help to the victims. It gives a monthly stipend of Tk 400 to 21 female students each.

The committee built 30 houses for as many families and gave Tk 7,000 to each of them on March 10 for rehabilitation.

The local Union Parishad chairman, Dayal Haridas Prashad, said the committee's initiative is commendable but not sufficient. "Proper rehabilitation is not possible without government initiatives," he says.

Fifteen cases were filed against the gangsters and police arrested 30 people, including the main accused Belal.

The villagers fear fresh attacks by the gangsters, who have been released from jail on bail. Belal is accused of raping three women after his release.

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Khulna cinema shut after bomb blast

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Police closed the Picture Palace cinema in the city yesterday after a hand bomb went off there at about 8-45 PM on Thursday.

None was injured as the explosion took place at the rear stall when most of the viewers came out.

Witnesses said an unidentified man hurled the bomb.

Hearing the explosion, police rushed there and cordoned off the cinema, but the culprit could not be nabbed, Shafiq Azam, Officer in Charge of Khulna thana said.

This was the third such incident in four about months in the cinema, a few yards from Khulna thana. Besides, an unexploded hand bomb was recovered from there in January.

Manager of the movie house is absconding.

Security has been tightened in all key installations including the Khulna power house at Goalpara, Radio and TV stations, and in Christian schools fearing sabotage, police said.