

Mass resignations hit Iraqi army battalion



Among protesters who demanded rights for prisoners in Baghdad yesterday, an Iraqi woman holds her daughter with a huge placard on her neck reading: 'I want my father back'.

AFP, Baghdad

About 300 of the 700 members in the first new Iraqi army battalion set up by the US-led coalition have resigned, a coalition official said Thursday.

"There are about 300 of these individuals out of a total of about 700 of the First Battalion of the new Iraqi army (who) have therefore resigned or effectively resigned," the official told a news conference on condition he not be identified.

Under daily attack by insurgents, the coalition is seeking to transfer more security responsibility to Iraqi forces.

"They weren't happy with terms and conditions and didn't obey the instructions of their commanding officers," he said.

"My understanding is that they felt they should be paid more money, for example, than the police," he said, adding that the coalition will review all security forces salaries.

The coalition administering Iraq is building a new army after dismissing all the members of Saddam Hussein's armed forces following his ouster by invading US and British troops in April.

"I think this is a particular problem related to that First Battalion," the official said. "There may have been some confusion when they first joined the Iraqi army. They weren't sure exactly what their terms and conditions are."

The rest of the First Battalion is serving with the US 4th Infantry Division.

He said a second Iraqi battalion is training "and there are no resignations from that." Another group

of more than 2,000 recruits is expected to begin training next year, he said.

Salaries in the new army range from 50 dollars a month in the ranks to 180 dollars for a colonel and are "hugely higher" than under the old regime, the coalition spokesman said.

A former air defence battery commander who held the rank of captain in Saddam's armed forces told AFP he used to earn 50 dollars a month.

Plans call for the new army to grow until it reaches a strength of about 40,000 soldiers in 27 motorised infantry battalions by late next year.

The First Battalion graduated in October after nine weeks of training and was assigned primarily to assist US troops with border security.

Former high-ranking officers were barred from joining the new fighting force but the US military said 75 percent of the first Iraqi recruits had served in lower ranks of Saddam's army.

Former Iraqi army and police officers will also be drafted into a specialised unit to fight loyalists of Saddam's Baath regime, an aide to Iyad Allawi, who is in charge of security on Iraq's interim Governing Council, told AFP on Wednesday.

"This force is already being created and will be made up of a battalion of 700 people, most of them officers in the former army and police," the official said.

"This is a stage in the process of transferring responsibility for security, from the coalition to Iraqis," he added, asking not to be named.

Schools, colleges to have IT course from 2005: PM

BSS, Geneva

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia said information technology (IT) will be introduced as a mainstream subject at secondary and higher secondary levels in Bangladesh from 2005.

"The government has started implementing a programme to provide all secondary schools with computer lab in phases," Khaleda said at a round-table on the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) Thursday evening.

United Nations Development Programme Administrator Mark Malloch Brown chaired the round-table titled "ICT as a tool to achieve the Millennium Development Goal" at Palexpo Conference Centre.

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Prime Minister Khaleda Zia speaks at a roundtable on the World Summit on Information Technology (WSIS) at Palexpo Conference Centre in Geneva on Thursday.

Ex-UP chairman shot in Rangamati

UNB, Rangamati

A former union parishad (UP) chairman was shot by unidentified miscreants in the remote Newlanker area of Baghaichhari upazila on Thursday night.

Police said Lal Ring Cha Thoa Pangkhoo, 50, ex-chairman of Sajek Union Parishad and elder brother of incumbent chairman El Thanga Pangkhoo, received five bullets in different parts of his body.

He was rushed to Baghaichhari Health Complex and later shifted to Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH) in a critical condition.

Meanwhile, unidentified miscreants cut tendons of legs and hands of a woman, Sonia Akhtar, and her one and a half years old daughter at Battoli in Kaptai upazila the same night.

They were admitted to the CMCH.

Halliburton overcharged US by millions on Iraq

REUTERS, Washington

A Pentagon audit of Halliburton, the oil services firm once run by Vice President Dick Cheney, found the company may have overbilled the US government by more than \$120 million on Iraq contracts, US defense officials said on Thursday.

Defense officials said Halliburton's Kellogg Brown and Root unit, which has denied wrongdoing, may have been overcharged by a Kuwaiti sub-contractor by \$61 million for fuel brought into Iraq from Kuwait under a deal signed in March with the US Army Corps of Engineers to rebuild Iraq's oil industry.

That non-competition deal,

which has clocked up about \$2 billion in business so far, is set to be replaced by two new, competitively bid contracts to rebuild Iraq's oil sector.

After several delays, a decision on those \$2 billion contracts is expected by mid-January and military sources said the audit would likely be considered when Halliburton's proposal was reviewed for the follow-on deals.

Under another KBR 10-year contract to provide logistical support for troops, the auditors found what they deemed a \$67 million overcharge for dining facilities throughout the region. The overcharge was denied before taxpayers were billed.

"DCAA (Defence Contract Audit Agency) audits have found some problems that the department is addressing" with KBR, Dov Zakheim, the Pentagon's chief financial officer, said in a written statement.

Halliburton said it was supplying documentation requested by the auditors. "KBR has acted in full accordance with its fiduciary and contractual responsibilities under the contract," said Halliburton spokeswoman Wendy Hall.

A senior defence official said Kellogg Brown and Root may have been paying the Kuwaiti company

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WFP executive director arrives today

UNB, Dhaka

James T Morris, executive director of the World Food Programme (WFP), arrives in Dhaka today on a five-day official visit.

For the first time a joint delegation from WFP headquarters in Rome and Boston Consulting Group (BCG), a US based general management consulting firm widely regarded as the global leader in business strategy, is visiting Bangladesh.

The delegation includes Carl W Stern, president and chief executive officer of BCG, senior officials of WFP and members of BCG.

Morris will meet Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Finance Minister Saifur Rahman and heads of other UN agencies in Bangladesh. He and his entourage will visit the northern region to observe WFP-assisted activities including vulnerable group development, school feeding and integrated food security.

Since 1974, WFP has been managing food aid activities in Bangladesh. The current five-year programme (2001-05) aims to achieve sustainable improvement in food security and nutrition for ultra-poor households through a number of strategic interventions.

Each year WFP reaches well over 2 million beneficiaries, including 500,000 ultra-poor women and 1.2 million school children, throughout Bangladesh.

Prayer Timings table for December 13 with columns for Azan and Jamaat.

Ruling alliance involved in crimes: Hasina

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Awami League President Sheikh Hasina yesterday blamed the BNP-led ruling alliance men for criminal activities and said some of its leaders are 'directly involved' in arms smuggling.

"Before the last general elections, the BNP chief (Khaleda Zia) had declared a war on violence and corruption. But in association with criminals, her government has now launched a war against the common man," said the leader of the opposition in parliament.

Hasina was speaking at a discussion to mark the 31st founding anniversary of AL's youth front Awami Jubo League and 64th birth anniversary of its founding chairman Sheikh Fazlul Haq Moni.

BNP has formed alliance with a party which has links to over a dozen communal militant organisations in the country, Hasina said at the discussion held in front of the

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Anti-Ahmadiyya outfit threatens newspapers with dire consequences

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Religious bigots, repeating their demand the government declare Ahmadiyyas non-Muslim, yesterday threatened newspapers with dire consequences if they did not acknowledge their 'just cause'.

"No newspaper will be spared from now, if it publishes any write-up against us," warned M Asadullah, joint secretary of Jamiyeh Talaba Arabia, part of Hifazate Khatme Nabuwat Andolon Coordination Committee, an anti-Ahmadiyya alliance.

Demonstrators at the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque also threatened to launch an anti-

government movement if it did not meet their demand by January 23.

"We will not leave the streets until our demand is met, no matter how many lives we have to sacrifice," vowed Mahmudul Hasan Mamtazi, amir of Nabuwat Andolon.

The group branded the Ahmadiyyas as kaffir (non-Muslim) at a hate-filled demonstration on December 5 that came after Mamtazi led a group to attack the Ahmadiyya Mosque on November 21, injuring about 100 people, 18 of them policemen.

Aamra Dhakabasi, a socio-

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B Chy likely to float 'platform' instead of political party

UNB, Dhaka

Former president Dr AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury prefers floating a 'hold-all platform' to forming a 'political party' to accommodate people of different shades of opinion and present a package formula for resolving national issues.

A close aide to the former president told the agency yesterday that Badruddoza would start formal dialogue with political leaders, professional groups, businesspeople and the elite towards the end of this month, with the opening of his office tentatively on December 16.

Moreover, he is planning to circulate a questionnaire to elicit opinion from cross-sections of people on key problems facing the nation. The problems include cor

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Frustration congeals in BNP as party-govt divide widens

REZAUL KARIM

Resentment is brewing in the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) as the gap between the party and the government is widening over non-holding of party meetings for long.

The BNP leadership appears unwilling to convene any meeting of the party forums apparently to escape flak from the grassroots leaders and activists, party leaders said.

Several policymakers and senior leaders put down the frustration of party men to the lack of scope to give vent to their grievances, as party meetings are not taking place.

They pointed out that most of the grassroots leaders and activists have a common grievance that only a section of 'opportunistic leaders and overtly enthusiastic newcomers' are busy making fortune ignoring the dedicated ones.

"It is true that only a handful of people based at a particular party centre are grabbing everything and enjoying power and facilities. Even the staff of that power base now use expensive vehicles," said a senior leader, requesting anonymity.

Party sources said discontent prevailed not only among the grassroots leaders and activists, but also among senior ministers and lawmakers as they did not have any scope to speak on various

issues at party forums.

Ministers are not usually allowed to speak on any issue beyond the agenda at cabinet meetings. That is why no minister could raise the issue of recent price hike of essens tials, sources added.

BNP lawmakers are also getting unhappy at the lack of parliamentary practices in the party and non-holding of parliamentary party meetings, where they can speak on the issues facing the nation.

The parliamentary party has met only twice so far -- first to elect its leader after the October 1, 2001 general elections and on June 19-20 last year to discuss a no confidence

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Tanguar haor free of plunderers

IQBAL SIDDIQUEE, Sylhet

The authorities have finally put an end to illegal possession and plunder of the huge fish resources of Tanguar haor (water body) in Sunamganj by organised influential groups for years together.

The district administration of Sunamganj recently launched a massive drive to establish its full control on the vast haor spread over Tahirpur and Dharmapasha upazilas.

Deputy Commissioner (DC) Jafar Siddique told The Daily Star yesterday, "We have freed Tanguar from all illegal occupants, who were plundering its fish wealth worth several crore taka a year."

Police and ansar personnel under the guidance of two magistrates were deployed in the haor areas and members of the BDR also helped them. Equipped with motorised boats, the teams are still there for round the clock patrol, the DC said.

Four temporary police-ansar camps have been set up in and around Tanguar. Two magistrates are sent there for one week and fresh police-ansar teams are d e p l o y e d

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Members of a special team of BDR, police and Ansar led by a magistrate check the fine-mesh nets seized from the Tanguar Haor, a water body on about 4,000 acres in Sunamganj.

PHOTO: STAR

DOWN TO EARTH Civic amenities fast disappearing in city

ASM NURUNNABI

The whole gamut of civic amenities in the Dhaka city covering parks and open spaces, rivers, lakes and playgrounds is fast losing ground mainly on account of unplanned urbanisation. The growing limitations tend to create feelings of a groovy life among many citizens.

A growing tendency towards encroachments on open public spaces in the city has been posing increasing threat to the public amenities, keeping such facilities shrinking, mainly due to pressure of expanding population, abetted in most cases by the avaricious proclivities of the evil elements of society. Among the more important public open spaces, which came under such threat are Usmany Udyan, Ramna Park, Suhrawardy Udyan and

Chandrima Udyan. The problem of encroachment on open public spaces is generally compounded when such open spaces are owned by government or any public agency. Such ownership in most cases leaves the owning quarters less prompt in taking remedial action and often indifferent when any incident of encroachment occurs with the result that the potential land grabbers don't hesitate to go to any length to satisfy their land hunger.

Some examples of encroachment may be noted at the Suhrawardy Udyan and also at the Ramna Park. The encroachment at the Suhrawardy Udyan takes place in the form of a free-for-all public bathing place in one pond of the garden. A chunk of land of the Ramna Park has already been taken up by a non-political body situated near Kakrail. Attempts at

recovery of the encroached portion of the land were rendered futile. The size of the park is getting reduced on account of the establishment of a so-called Chinese restaurant on a part of the park and more due to the presence of anti-social elements, causing avoidance of visitors to the park. The basic amenity of passing a few free moments in open air on a park bench has disappeared, since the concrete park benches are no longer there. There is also the proclivity of all and sundry for using the lake at will as a public bathing place.

A few municipal parks set up previously in some wards of the Corporation have already gone out of use due to encroachments. The pieces of vacant lands under public or private ownership, which were

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