

Iraq moves closer

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"We will publish nothing until the report because it adds another element of credibility to the commission," Hindawisi said.

The final certified results will be announced a few days later, after time for further appeals, he added.

Early results last month suggested that Shiite-backed religious parties and their Kurdish allies would be returned to power.

A Western diplomat said Iraq's political parties should take their time in forming the four-year government to ensure it is broad-based and accepted by the country's Shiite-majority, minority Sunni Arabs and the Kurds.

"There are a lot of negotiations going on behind closed doors," the diplomat said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

As for hopes that the new leaders will help quell the daily violence that has hit all walks of Iraqi society, the diplomat noted that Sunni Arabs, who had shunned a previous election last January, took part in the December poll.

"I think it is important that the Iraqi people see they have a stake in the government and the political process. That would undermine, one would hope, the insurgency."

A US general warned on Thursday, however, of a probable surge in attacks before the government is formed, pointing to bombings last week in Baghdad, the Shiite city of Karbala and the Sunni-dominated city of Ramadi.

In the latest violence, seven Iraqi policemen were wounded, two seriously, when a car bomb exploded on Friday in Baquba, some 60 km from Baghdad, security officials said.

Nine civilians were also wounded when a car-borne suicide bomber targeted US forces in the restive city of Fallujah, 50 km from the capital, a local hospital said. There was no immediate word on possible US casualties.

Meanwhile, lawyers for ailing Tareq Aziz, Iraq's foreign minister under Saddam Hussein, said they

have filed an application with the government for his immediate release on compassionate grounds.

The lawyers also asked France, Italy and Sweden if they could accept the 69-year-old for urgent medical treatment.

August 17 Blasts

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The assistant public prosecutor who stood to defend Hannan after 93 days of his arrest on January 4 was, however, not found at the court Thursday.

The investigation officer in the forwarding report said the information obtained from Hannan and Awal is being verified and the two need to be confined in jail custody until the investigation completes.

Naming the two as directly involved with the August 17 country-wide serial blasts, including the one at Mirpur Road in the capital, the report said they need to be interrogated further to find out vital clues to the case and the whereabouts of their accomplices.

Following the hearing, Metropolitan Magistrate Jagannath Das Khokan placed Hannan and Awal on a 10-day remand for interrogation.

Hannan, Hujj operations commander in Bangladesh, has been remanded for 102 days since his arrest on October 1 last year. Abdul Awal, son-in-law of JMB chief Shaikh Abdul Rahman, has also been remanded for 55 days after his arrest on November 18.

Hannan was placed on remand for the 15th time and Awal for the ninth time.

Mufti Hannan, who dodged arrest for several years, was shown arrested in seven other blast cases filed with Tejgaon, Ramna, Motijheel and Demra police stations.

JMB's Rajshahi region chief Awal is a member of the outfit's highest tier Majlis-e-Shura and was captured on a Dinajpur-bound bus at Thakurgaon on November 18.

AI praises govt for being 'open' on HR, issues

UNB, Dhaka

Amnesty International (AI) has commended Bangladesh government for being "open and accessible" on issues and concerns relating to human rights.

The commendation from the officials of the human rights organisation came Thursday morning when Bangladesh High Commissioner in London Sabihuddin Ahmed had an hour-long meeting with AI Secretary General Irene Z. Khan in London.

The AI officials also said they were contemplating sending an Amnesty International mission to Bangladesh sometime this year, possibly in June or July, according to a message received in Dhaka.

Ahmed specifically pointed out the determination of the government in tackling various problems, including the firmness with which the JMB is being confronted and the successes that have been attained on this front so far.

The Bangladeshi high commissioner also emphasised continuing a process of engagement and assured AI of his continuous attention to issues raised by it.

AI Director for Asia-Pacific Regional Programme Purna Sen was present.

High Commissioner Sabihuddin Ahmed was assisted by Press Minister Fazal M Kamal.

200 shanties

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Solosahar area under Bayezid Bostami Police Station on Tuesday night. The fire broke out at three slums—Ashik Colony, Farid Colony and Matin Colony, damaging property worth about Tk 2 lakh.

Meanwhile, the two incidents of fire at Boalkhali and Raozan in the district on Wednesday and Thursday damaged property worth over Tk 6 lakh.

JCD cadres

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The gang looted the money and fled the scene, leaving Shahid unconscious.

Shahid filed a case with the Sylhet Kotwali Police station, accusing JCD cadres Rashed, Tamim, Suman and a few unnamed others.

The police could not yet recover the money and arrest anyone.

Vegetable

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Hearing the gunshots, his neighbours came forward to catch the criminals when they shot Rafiqul Islam, 25, security guard of the nearby house, in the chest and fled the scene.

Jewel and Rafiqul are undergoing treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

EU pledges

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than 350,000 birds in the past two weeks.

Iran has started mass culling of poultry along its border with Turkey to try to stop the disease spreading, a health ministry official said on Friday.

France said it was extending its poultry confinement measures to 58 departments from an original 26 as fears grow over a virus believed to be carried by migratory birds.

Tamiflu maker Roche told a bird flu conference in Tokyo it was in talks with the World Health Organization (WHO) about donating more of the drug to set up an Asian stockpile.

The Swiss firm has already given 30 million capsules to the WHO for "rapid response" stockpiles, part of which have been sent to Turkey, said David Reddy, Roche's flu pandemic taskforce leader.

Health officials at the Tokyo meeting, attended by more than 20 countries, called for greater surveillance and urged richer countries to help poorer ones achieve that.

The United Nations has said donors will need to contribute about \$1.4 billion at a conference next week in Beijing to finance the next phase of the global campaign against bird flu.

Announcing the EU aid worth \$100 million at a news conference in Brussels, EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said: "I am optimistic we are going to close the financial gap in Beijing."

The more birds are infected worldwide, the more likely it is that people may become infected through close contact. As cold weather forces animals and people indoors together, especially in rural areas, animal-to-human infections could become even more common, experts said.

"When we have a child infected we are giving the virus more chance to adapt to human beings and giving it this chance could help create conditions of the emergence of a new virus," Dr Guenaël Rodier, head of the WHO mission to Turkey, told Reuters.

WHO said its experts were working with Turkish officials to study the virus and its patterns of attack. More samples of the virus were en route to laboratories, the WHO said.

Trination pipeline

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for its energy-guzzling and growing economy. Indian Petroleum Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar had also planned to build a 290-km pipeline from Myanmar's west coast through Bangladesh to transport the gas to India.

India had also planned to use the pipeline from Myanmar to transport isolated reserves of natural gas in northeastern Indian states to consumption centres in other parts.

Under the MoU signed between Myanmar and PetroChina, the gas from Block A would be carried through an overlaid pipeline to Kunming province of southeast China.

The news of Myanmar deciding to sell the gas to China from the block came on the eve of Aiyar's three-day visit to China to discuss bilateral cooperation in search for energy sources abroad where China had been outbidding India in a number of cases.

What is worse for India was that Myanmar did not even inform India that it was going to sign the MoU with PetroChina. Besides, Aiyar had been planning a visit to Yangon later this month in connection with the proposed pipeline, petroleum ministry sources said.

Aiyar, for his part, told reporters on Wednesday in Beijing that although this looked like a setback for India, it would continue efforts with Myanmar. He said Myanmar and PetroChina had only come to an "in-principle" agreement, which was not a commercial commitment. Besides, India has other options, he added.

Myanmar's decision to sell gas to PetroChina came against the backdrop of tardy pace of talks on the trilateral pipeline that had been announced in March last year.

Although Aiyar said India did not look at China "as a strategic competitor but a strategic partner" in hydrocarbon sector, the fact is that Indian companies have been consistently beaten by Chinese firms in securing oil and gas reserves overseas.

India's ONGC lost to Chinese companies in Kazakhstan, Ecuador and Angola, and most recently a 45 percent stake in a \$2.3 billion bid for a Nigerian oil and gas field. The Indian energy major withdrew from the race for the Nigerian energy source, after the cabinet had raised concerns over specified risks.

However, in the first instance of Sino-Indian cooperation, India and China won a joint bid in December last to buy PetroCanada's 37 percent stake in Syrian oil fields for \$573 million.

During Aiyar's visit to Beijing, India and China signed a slew of

MoUs on energy cooperation, including between ONGC Videsh Ltd, India's flagship firm for overseas oil and gas field acquisitions, and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC).

According to Aiyar, cooperative relationship between India and China is not only desirable but also eminently feasible to avoid costly competition for energy assets abroad.

There is recognition in both the countries that efforts to outbid each other drive the prices up. For instance, CNPC had paid \$4.18 billion to acquire Petro Kazakhstan in August last year, beating ONGC's offer of \$3.9 billion.

A death trap

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Abul Hasnat admitted that the steep slope does pose a serious threat. He said, despite "all-out efforts", they could not persuade the landowners to give up their land for constructing safer roadsides.

"All I can hope is one day the landowners will fill up the area and build structures at the level same as the road, eliminating the danger," he added.

The area the road is built in is designated as a flood plain. The road stretches from east to west with only two small culverts giving passage to huge volumes of floodwater. This poses a serious threat of the road getting washed away. Lack of drainage of floodwater from the rivers Turag and Buriganga caused severe erosion two years ago wiping away nearly 70 houses in Basila.

The slope of the roadsides is so steep that even if a pedestrian survives a fall from the road, it would be hard for him to climb back. If a vehicle falls from such a height the result would be even more devastating.

Possibilities of serious accidents are even greater on the road as most of the passenger vehicles plying on it are very old and unfit. Most of the drivers on the road are also very young -- some of them even have no valid driving licence.

An engineer of Water Development Board (WDB), requesting anonymity, said the office concerned for constructing dykes and roads throughout the country considers a three-foot slope on any side of a road for every foot of the road-width to be the standard. "It seems the design is faulty as the slope on Basila road does not cover even six inches from the road surface to the land surface 25 feet below," the engineer added.

Dense fog, biting cold

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on schedule.

News agency UNB reports that over 12,000 people remained stranded for about nine hours amid chilly wind at Paturia ferry terminal as ferry services were suspended Tuesday night due to dense fog. Not less than eight thousand people suffered the same fate at Maowa ferry terminal too.

Many people had to offer their Eid prayers at the terminals failing to reach home on time.

Official sources said the Paturia-Daulatdia ferry service has remained suspended during the nights through the last week. Some cattle-laden trucks, which started for the capital to sell the cattle in Dhaka's markets for sacrifices on the Daulatdia side of the river, the UNB reports.

Normal life remained paralysed and generally miserable everywhere in northern Bangladesh for the seventh consecutive day yesterday, official sources said.

Motor vehicles were seen plying

the roads with their fog lights on. Poor and middle class people have been crowding second-hand clothing markets to buy warm clothes.

Our Nilphamari correspondent reports that on the consecutive seventh day of the cold wave, at least 15 people died of cold and cold related diseases. Pneumonia and cold diarrhoea are spreading alarmingly in Dimla upazila affecting hundreds of people especially the children and elderly people.

Our Narayanganj correspondent reports that movement of water vessels at nights has remained suspended for the last four days, mounting the sufferings of Eid travellers. Many of them had to spend nights at the launch terminal amid shivering cold.

The BSS reports that two persons died of the cold wave yesterday in Barisal and Bhola.

Elderly people, children, patients in hospitals and over one lakh people living in the char (shoal) areas on the Brahmaputra and Ganges basins continue to suffer due to bitter cold.

Wrangle over hide price

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Association (BTA). Besides, he said, hides-laden trucks from districts have also begun to arrive in the capital and expressed the hope if this tight security prevails for a few more days the export of hide is sure to scale up.

Hazi Samiruddin, a prominent wholesaler at Postogola, said he has procured more than 15,000 rawhides at prices ranging between Tk 1,350 and Tk 1,750.

Lalbagh Madrasa, one of the big sources of hides for the wholesalers in Dhaka, this year has sold a raw hide at Tk 1,675 on an average, which was Tk 1,500 last year, Samiruddin explained.

As exporters are getting Tk 5 more per square foot of hide due to devaluation of the local currency, price is comparatively higher at the wholesale level this year, Samiruddin added.

Traders said this year they have bought a big cowhide for Tk 1,600 to Tk 1,700, a medium one for Tk 1,100 to Tk 1,200 and a small one for Tk 800 to Tk 1,000.

On the other hand, the prices of goat-hides ranged between Tk 200 and Tk 250.

According to tanners association, the supply of cattle and goat this year has been around 20 per cent higher than that of last year, as the purchasing capacity of people has improved and the prices of sacrificial animals were also rea-

Sharon in coma

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sundown on Friday.

Doctors have given a series of upbeat medical reports following the initial shock of the demise of a man many in Israel regarded as the ultimate strongman with a near-infallible resilience.

The prime minister has gone through three bouts of surgery to stem bleeding in his brain since being admitted to hospital on January 4 after suffering his second stroke in about two weeks.

"Little by little, he is giving us more signs that he is getting better but he will not wake up for the next day or two," chief neurosurgeon Felix Umansky said Thursday.

Nevertheless an opinion poll published in the mass selling Yedioth Aharanot newspaper revealed that an overwhelming 87 percent of those interviewed doubted Sharon would ever return to his duties as prime minister.

Despite Sharon's stricken state, the new centrist party that he founded just six weeks before his collapse has maintained a sweeping lead over rivals in the latest opinion polls published ahead of Israel's general election in March.

The polls, conducted by the Maariv and Yedioth Aharanot newspapers, accorded Kadima 43 and 42 seats respectively in the 120-member parliament.

The centre-left Labour party would win 17 and Sharon's crisis-ridden former Likud party, which has increasingly shifted towards the right, 16 seats according to Maariv or 13 as reported by Yedioth.

Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who is now almost certain to lead Kadima to the March 28 election, was favourite to be elected premier with 45.7 percent, it went ahead of Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu with 26.6 percent.

Olmert, a politician with decades of experience, nonetheless lacks Sharon's charisma and faces a huge task in navigating the security and political problems facing Israel.

A de facto Palestinian truce in militant attacks came to an official end last month and Israel fears a spike in violence in the two weeks ahead of a Palestinian parliamentary election on January 25.

On Thursday, a Palestinian militant blew himself up and a second was shot dead by Israeli troops during an arrest operation in the volatile West Bank town of Jenin. There were no Israeli casualties.

The latest deaths, however, raised to 4,930 the number of people killed in Israeli-Palestinian violence in the last five years.

In a telephone conversation with US President George W. Bush on Thursday, Olmert warned that the Middle East peace process would remain stymied if Hamas entered a Palestinian government.

Israel and the United States both regard Hamas, which is contesting parliamentary elections for the first time, as a terrorist organisation.

Death toll

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crowded they fell on the ground one on top of the other," he said.

"People kept falling one on top of the other until about 300 people died," he said.

"Our pilgrim brothers are forbidden from carrying baggage and workloads on their shoulders during the stoning ritual."

On Thursday, Saudi Health Minister Hamad bin Abdullah Al-Maneh said the stampede was caused by "unruly pilgrims, and a problem of luggage."

Interior ministry spokesman Mansur Al-Turki also said the accident occurred "because of the luggage that fell and led to a rush at the eastern entrance of the Jamarat bridge," where the pilgrims stone the three pillars.

The stoning of Satan is the riskiest episode of the hajj as the pilgrims jostle to make sure their pebbles touch the pillar while the weaker ones risk being trampled on by the masses.

The latest tragedy comes days after 76 people were killed when a hostel in the heart of Makkah collapsed last week.

Almost 60,000 security, health, emergency and other personnel were involved in organising this year's hajj, trying to prevent the deadly incidents that have marred it in recent years from being repeated.

A total of 251 Muslim pilgrims were trampled to death in the 2004 hajj as people panicked during the stoning.

The ritual, which is spread out over three days, marks the final part of the hajj pilgrimage for the more than two million Muslim pilgrims who have flocked to Makkah from around the world.

In 2003, 14 pilgrims, including six women, were killed in a stampede during the first day of the stoning ritual, and 35 died in 2001, while in 1998 the hajj saw 118 killed and more than 180 hurt at Mina.

The deadliest toll of the pilgrimage was in 1990 when 1,426 pilgrims were trampled or asphyxiated to death in a stampede in a tunnel, also in Mina.

The hajj, which follows a journey by Prophet Mohammed (SM) over 1,400 years ago, is one of the five pillars of Islam and a once-in-a-life time duty for those able to complete it.

18 killed as bus falls

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The injured were taken to local clinics, Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) and orthopaedics hospital in the capital. One of the injured succumbed to the injuries at the DMCH.

In another incident, one Marjina Begum, 28, a Tablig Jamaat activist, was killed when a passenger bus driving on the wrong side of the road ran over her at Kazipara in the capital at 10:00am on Eid day.

RANGPUR
A Dinajpur-bound bus from Dhaka collided head on with a Bogra-bound bus from Kurigram at Bishmail of Piyashi upazila at around 6:45am on Wednesday, killing bus-helper Rashed and injuring 30 passengers. Bus driver Noor Islam died later at Rajshahi Medical College and Hospital (RMCH).

Another head-on collision between a Dhaka-Rangpur bus and a Bogra-bound lorry at Boldi Pukur of Mithapukur upazila 45 minutes later killed passengers Sabbir, 28, Aminul, 25, and Treepraga, 65, and injured 20 others.

As the vehicles were lying on the road, five buses from both directions hit them, injuring 40 passengers.

On Thursday, a Kurigram-bound United Paribahan bus collided with a Dhaka-bound SB Paribahan bus at Obhiram of the same upazila at 7:15am, killing bus-conductor Ranjit, passengers Bablu Mia, 35, Tariqul, 35, Sattar, 37, and two unidentified passengers and injuring 20 others.

Most of the injured were rushed to RMCH while others were admitted to local hospitals.

GAIBANDHA

A Rangpur-bound truck, carrying people to Bakshipur village of Nilphamari district, skidded off the road as the driver lost its control at Fashitola on the Bogra-Rangpur Highway in Gobindaganj upazila on Eid day.

The truck fell into the roadside ditch and drowned, killing Monarul, 11, Farida, 25, Jaharul, 35, and Kala Mia, 40, on the spot and injuring 12 others.

One Shahidul was killed and 40 passengers were injured as a Dhaka-bound coach of Bismillah Paribahan collided head on with a Gaibandha-bound coach of Al Hamra at Tulshighat in Gaibandha town the same day.

A passenger-loaded three-wheeler fell into the roadside ditch of the Gaibandha-Sadullapur road, injuring three people on Eid day.

MYMENSINGH

Three persons were killed and five others injured when a Dhaka-bound passenger bus from Sherpur hit a three-wheeler at Alalpur at about 5:30pm Thursday.

Jahir Uddin, 55, and Chikas Begum, 12, of Galagan village of Phulpur upazila died on the spot while Rabeya Begum, 35, wife of Sirajul Islam, died on the way to Mymensingh Medical College and Hospital.

In another incident at Chechua in Muktagachha upazila, one Abbas Ali, 55, and his sister-in-law Fatema Akhter, 35, of Kusumpur village of Jamalpur were killed and over 20 were injured when a Jamalpur-bound bus skidded off the road and fell into the roadside ditch at 7:30am yesterday.

One Giasuddin, 65, and Abdus Samad, 75, were killed and 10 others were injured when a Nandail-bound bus from Mymensingh collided head on with a three-wheeler at Dangribandha at 3:00pm yesterday.

In another road mishap, 25 persons were injured, five of them

critically, when a Dhubaura-bound bus from Haluaghat fell into the roadside ditch at Sumuliapara in Haluaghat as the driver lost control over the steering yesterday.

SIRAJGANJ
Two people were killed and 32 were injured when a Gaibandha-bound bus from Chittagong skidded off the road and fell into the roadside ditch as the driver lost control over the steering in Kodda area.

One Nazmul, 27, of Chariashika village of Solonga, died on the spot when a microbus fell into the roadside ditch at Harikchhara on the Hatikumrul-Bonpara road. Another Omar Ali, 35, of Betua village in Raiganj, died on the spot when a speeding truck hit his motorbike from behind at Dhlanghora in Raiganj upazila.

KHULNA
Local madrasa secretary Mohammad Amir Ali, 70, died on the spot as a Jessore-bound coach of Royal Paribahan crushed his motorbike at Boira bypass road at noon on Eid day.

Cattle trader Abul Kalam, 45, was killed and three others injured on Tuesday when a truck carrying sacrificial cattle turned upside down near the Rupsha Bridge.

One Abdus Salam, 50, was killed and 35 others were injured when a bus carrying a picnic party fell into a ditch near Chokoria College Gate in Cox's Bazar yesterday.

An unidentified woman was killed and seven others injured when a Sherpur-bound coach skidded off the road at Rashidabad of Kishoreganj at 3:00am yesterday.

A passenger bus ran over Jasmine, 14, a class nine student, at Isadi village under Babuganj upazila in Barisal at 6:30pm on Wednesday while one Jasim, 40, died in a road accident at Gajaria in Munshiganj on Tuesday noon.

PANCHGARH

Seven people, including a father and his son, were killed and 30 others were injured in two separate road accidents in Fakhirhat and Basainagar areas in the district on Eid day.

B'BARIA

Three people including pedestrians were killed and 30 were injured in a road mishap at the Biswa Road intersection on the Dhaka-Sylhet Highway Thursday afternoon.

Two people were killed in separate incidents at Gotonshahar and Pakortoli in Joypurhat Thursday while two unknown people were killed in separate road accidents on Wednesday.

Accidents were also reported at Keraniganj and Dhamrai in Dhaka, Parnaduali in Magura, Boulgram in Madaripur, Satarbia intersection in Naogaon, Kornoghor in Narayanganj, Malauri in Modhupur and Balaganj in Sylhet, killing eight others during the four days.

Eid celebrated

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on the occasion and exchanged Eid greetings.

The president hosted the reception at Bangabhaban for diplomats and the elite of the city. The prime minister hosted the reception at Pradhan Mantri Bhaban for diplomats and cross-sections of people.

Since Opposition Leader Sheikh Hasina is away from the country performing the holy hajj, Awami League leaders Obaidul Qader and Saber Hossain Chowdhury exchanged Eid greetings with