

Hamas sends militant force into streets

AFP, Gaza City

Hamas announced yesterday that a new security force, which was initially vetoed by Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas, had begun its mission to end the lawlessness pervading the Gaza Strip.

As two more Hamas followers were killed in overnight shootings linked to their dispute with Abbas's Fatah faction, Hamas interior minister Said Siam said the new volunteer force would seek to restore the rule of law.

"The current weakness of the security forces is clear to everyone. There is stealing, kidnapping and killing, so there is a real need for this force," Siam told a news conference.

The force would consist of 3,000 members of all the Palestinian factions and would answer directly to his ministry, he added.

Siam announced on April 21 that he was creating a special force of gunmen from armed factions to supplement the work of police and security officers in clamping down on rampant chaos in the territories.

He also nominated top Gazabased militant Jamal Abu Samhadana, who is wanted in Israel for scores of attacks, to a senior position in the interior ministry to oversee various security elements, including the new force.

Abbas, who has overall responsibility for security, dismissed the force and the appointment of Abu Samhadana as unconstitutional.

More recently, however, officials close to the moderate Palestinian Authority president have indicated he would not take issue with the force if it acted as a volunteer auxiliary to the existing security apparatus.

There was no immediate comment on Wednesday's announcement from Abbas, who is in Strasbourg, France.

Siam insisted there was no disagreement over the force, which he said "has been formed in agreement with the office of the president."

The existing security services are dominated by members of Fatah, which has been involved in a growing number of clashes with followers of the radical Islamist group Hamas, which formed its first government in March.

Security sources said

Wednesday a Hamas follower had been killed in error overnight by gunmen from the faction's armed wing.

Bilal Abu Qasia, 30, of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, died when two Brigades units in separate cars exchanged fire "by mistake" in the Jabaliya refugee camp on the northern outskirts of Gaza City.

He was shot just hours after a Hamas militant was killed by unknown gunmen in Gaza City, and a second shot and wounded west of Khan Yunis.

A bomb also exploded overnight at the home of a Fatah official in Beit Lahya in northern Gaza, security sources said. No one was injured and there was no claim of responsibility.

Abbas and Hamas leaders, including prime minister Ismail Haniya, have made a series of appeals in recent days for an end to the intra-Palestinian violence.

The new security force, however, seems likely to increase rather than ease friction between the two sides.

"This reminds us of what goes on in Iraq, with one force belonging to one faction totally independent of the security apparatus," Fatah spokesman Tawfiq Abu Khussa told AFP.

"This will be a force above the law and this is something we cannot accept."

Hamas insists the new security force is well within its constitutional powers.

But Nizar Abdel Qader Rayan, a member of the Hamas politburo in Gaza, said "this is a legal force. The interior minister has the right to do this."

Observers believe the Fatah-Hamas rivalry could end up diverting Palestinians' attention away from the Israeli government's controversial plan to fix the final borders -- with or without agreement from the Palestinians.

"While everyone is busy with the petty internal issues, the future of the territories is being sealed unilaterally by Israel in the West Bank," said Mouin Rabbani, an analyst with the International Crisis Group.

Trade, Rohingya

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with the balance heavily tilting towards Myanmar. Bangladesh imported goods worth \$ 32.43 million against its export of \$ 4.18 million during the period.

Dhaka will also request Yangon to take effective steps for quick and smooth repatriation of the remaining 21,172 Rohingya refugees camped in Cox's Bazar since the early 90s.

Hemayet said Dhaka will also emphasise construction of the proposed Bangladesh-Myanmar road and seek to know Yangon's latest position in this regard.

Earlier, this issue was discussed at communications secretary level. The proposed road is seen as vital for establishing greater links with Thailand and China. Besides, easing Myanmar's visa regime for Bangladeshi businessmen and other travelers would be discussed.

The foreign secretary will hold a meeting with businessmen in Yangon tomorrow and call on the foreign minister of Myanmar.

On regional issues, he said since Myanmar is also a member of BIMSTEC and ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), issues concerning them would also be discussed. Myanmar supported Bangladesh in getting observer status at the ARF.

Hemayet will return home on May 21.

Darul Ihsan VCs

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released at 4:00pm when they signed papers containing the students' nine-point demand that includes resolving all the problems of the university within May 29.

The two groups of the trustee board are now fighting a legal battle to capture the university's property, said a student, adding, "We are worried about our academic career due to their groupings and so we demand solution of the problem."

The university trustee board, however, did not send any name to the education ministry for approval of the president, who is also chancellor of the universities.

Urged by the students, Syed Ali Naki and MA Rashid came to the campus at around 10:30am when the students asked them who the legal authority of the university was.

As both of them claimed as the vice chancellor, the students confined them on the first floor of the university building at Shyamoli.

Ali Naki promised the students to solve the problem in an apologetic tone. His opponent MA Rashid also requested the students to remain calm, saying that the problem would be solved soon.

The aggrieved students submitted a nine-point demand that includes solving the problems within May 29 in the presence of representatives of the Ministry of Education, University Grant Commission, all trustee board members of the university and students' representatives from all departments and batches.

They also demanded not punishing any student, stopping all appointments until the problem is solved, and withdrawal of police from the university campus.

Earlier on Monday, students staged demonstration on its Dhanmondi campus and locked all the office rooms as Syed Ali Naki, who earlier assured them of showing documents in support of his claim on Wednesday, retracted from his statement.

India rejects

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Mukherjee told parliament "there was no question of any withdrawal of troops from Siachen so long as talks going on with Pakistan on the issue do not yield any results.

"Nine round of talks have been held on Siachen and the 10th round is going to be held on May 23 and 24," he said.

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf earlier this year urged India to withdraw troops from three Kashmiri towns and from Siachen.

Indian military negotiators claim some headway in previous rounds of talks to fix an agreed ceasefire line on Siachen, where extreme weather kills more troops than combat.

"There has been some convergence of views following the exchange of map grid-points but core disputes need to be thrashed out this time," a senior military surveyor told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Military experts estimate there are 7,000 Indian troops and 4,000 Pakistanis stationed there.

Mukherjee also ruled out troop withdrawals from towns in the Kashmir valley.

"The number of security forces in the valley will depend on the

changing threat perception, and since no decrease has been noticed in that regard, no troops withdrawal was under consideration," he said.

The comments came as 15 Hindu activists were wounded Wednesday in a fresh attack on the minority religious community in Kashmir by suspected militants.

National Security Adviser M. K. Narayanan also rejected calls to withdraw some troops from Indian Kashmir, where an Islamic separatist insurgency has claimed at least 44,000 lives since 1989.

"Militancy, hitherto confined to that state, is fast spreading to other places, including Varanasi and Bangalore," Narayanan said in the southern city of Kozhikode.

The comments were a reference to two separate attacks earlier this year in the two cities which were blamed on Islamic rebels.

"There are therefore no options for demilitarisation now as we cannot compromise on our security there," the Press Trust of India quoted him as saying.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since their 1947 independence from the British, two of them over Kashmir.

8 JMB men

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The accused are -- JMB chief Abdur Rahman, Shura members Siddique Islam Bangla Bhai and Abdul Awal, Rajshahi divisional chief Kamal alias Shafullah Tareq, Rajshahi divisional ammunition supplier Tarikul Islam, Delwar Hossain alias Mithu alias Hasibul Islam, Arif alias Alal alias Abdur Rahman Karim and Abdur Rahim alias Nasim alias Shahadat.

Of them, Arif and Abdur Rahim are absconding.

In the charge sheet submitted to a metropolitan magistrate's court, the IO also described the JMB activities since 2000, its origin of funds, reasons for resorting to terrorism and how they carried out the "unprecedented and combined" serial blasts across the country.

8 RELIEVED OF CHARGES
The militants who are relieved of the charges are -- Rajshahi regional JMB commanders Shafullah alias Faruk and Abu Isa alias Enamul Haque, financial aide Akhtarul Islam, Abdul Mazid, Abdur Razzak, Abul Kalam Azad, Abdur Rahman alias Khaled and Zahurul alias Babu.

The IO explained that no evidence or witnesses holding them responsible for the blast at Nawdapara Bazar were found during the investigation.

The JMB men carried out the bomb attacks in the district on August 17 after Rahman and Bangla Bhai gave them final order at around 10:00am on the day, he added.

JS body

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home and education ministries to collect information about the manpower companies that often publish colourful ads in newspapers to attract students, and especially those offering scholarship or admission to foreign educational institutions.

"We have requested the home and education ministries to identify these agencies involved in exporting labourers in the name of students," Major (ret'd) Quamrul Islam, state minister for the expatriates' welfare ministry, told reporters. "We also informed our missions in different countries about the matter," he added.

Replying to a question, he said these incidents of cheating will not affect the country's manpower export.

Nazir Hossain, chairman of the committee, however, said the unlawful activity of exporting labourers in the name of students has damaged the country's image and is harmful for its manpower export.

"After a long time the Malaysian government has given the green signal to the Bangladesh government regarding manpower export to that country. So, we should be alert about it," he added.

The parliamentary body also asked its ministry to coordinate the activities of Bangladesh Overseas Employment Service Ltd and Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agency.

3 reporters

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are now staying in Dhaka as Shahidul deployed a number of musclemen at various points in Kushtia town to kill us," said Hasan, also Kushtia district correspondent of satellite television channel RTV, while reading out the statement.

Shahidul used to threaten and misbehave with them for reporting his corruption, extortion and mafialike activities, the statement described.

"Manipulating the local administration, Shahidul lodged a number of false cases against local journalists to harass them and their families. The police also raided their homes looking for them," said Al Mamun, adding many local journalists including himself could not carry out their professional duties fearing oppression by Shahidul.

The lawmaker has the right to file cases against the newspapers for publishing the reports against him, but he has no right to file cases against the reporters, observed daily Bangladesh Observer Editor Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury at the conference. "We will welcome Shahidul Islam if he abides by the law," he added.

Iqbal Sobhan issued a 24-hour ultimatum to the government to ensure security of the reporters, which, he said, is its duty. Journalists will launch a tough movement, if the government fails to provide full security for the Kushtia journalists, he declared.

Kushtia-based journalists Munshi Tariqul Islam and Manjur Ehsan Chowdhury were also present at the press conference.

Dhaka-Ctg

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highway to four-lane with a view to easing the growing pressure on it.

The alternative highway, if approved by the government, will reduce the distance between Dhaka and Chittagong from 264-km to 200-km, the discussants said.

Replying to queries, Mannan Bin Amir said they have sought a concession period of 35 years. Apart from the five-year construction period, the group has sought a 30-year toll collection period to repatriate their investment. As per the proposal, 20 percent of the construction work may go to local companies.

Gas pipeline blown up in Pakistan: 3 die

REUTERS, Quetta

Tribal militants fighting for more autonomy blew up a natural gas pipeline in Pakistan's troubled southwest yesterday, killing a girl and wounding her mother and another relative, officials said.

The girl died when the 16 inch diameter pipeline passing near her house in Dera Bugti town in Baluchistan province blew up, Abdul Samad Lasi, a senior government official in the area, said.

In another incident, militants attacked a police station near Dera Bugti and killed two policemen.

Another policeman was seriously injured in a land mine explosion in the town of Kohlu.

Baluchistan, Pakistan's largest but poorest of four provinces, is home to the country's largest gas

and oil reserves. Baluch militants resent local resources being used to benefit other regions and regularly blow up gas pipelines, rail links and power pylons, and launch rocket attacks on government buildings and army bases in the province.

Six police commandoes were killed in a series of land mine explosions at a training school on the outskirts of the provincial capital Quetta last week.

The simmering revolt escalated in December when rebel tribesmen fired rockets in Kohlu during a visit by President Pervez Musharraf.

Musharraf has announced plans for major infrastructure projects in Baluchistan to win back support but authorities have vowed to deal sternly with the militants.

Petrobangla to take

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Namnam sources however claimed that the remaining project work will be completed within May this year. According to the first project profile approved in the early nineties, the production deadline was June 1998.

Under the circumstances, Petrobangla is being forced to take over the project while expensive mining equipment on the surface and underground have already rusted due to lack of use.

Petrobangla in a counter letter on May 15 asked for a fitness certificate before trial production, sources in MGCL said.

Namnam repeatedly changed the deadlines last year, first from October 2004 to April 2005, then to July, then to September 8 and finally to May 5 of this year. It also sought extra funding.

Considering Namnam's slow progress, the government on June 15, 2005 held a meeting chaired by the erstwhile state minister for energy and mineral resources, AKM Mosharraf Hossain, and decided not to award the contract for management of the project to the North Korean company.

The meeting also decided to award state-owned Petrobangla the contract to extract hard rock through its subsidiary MGCL. If needed, Petrobangla will hire experts for production, and on demand it will engage workers and experts of Namnam, according to MGCL sources.

Namnam has been working to develop the field since 1993-94. The project cost has now risen to Tk 1,275 crore from the original estimation of Tk 650 crore due to the delay.

As the government was stuck with such a large project, it had to extend the deadline and approved an increased project cost hoping that the project will start production someday.

Meanwhile, the project authorities completed the construction of surface infrastructures like railway tracks for transporting hard rock, office buildings, underground pump stations, towers and weighbridges for trucks.

Sources said according to the project proposal Namnam was responsible to develop manpower through Blue Star. At least 12 people were sent to Korea for training on hard rock mining. But they also left their jobs due to repeated missing of deadlines.

Even if Petrobangla succeeds in recruiting adequate manpower it will take at least a year and a half more to go into production, Patrobangla sources in Dinajpur said.

Questions were also raised about Namnam's work quality, when two out of four wires of a lift snapped on November 6, 2005. At that time, the lift was loading hard rock at a depth of 1,100 feet. All mining works were suspended after the incident.

Soon afterwards, the MGCL authorities found that the mine's high powered water pump had become unusable. Namnam repaired the water pump. Petrobangla asked for a brand new pump, which Namnam declined to provide.

Several meetings later, Petrobangla asked Namnam again to

replace the faulty pump by importing a new one as such pumps are not available in the country. But, Namnam's response was again negative. The incident has now raised questions about the quality of all the installed machinery.

Managing Director of Madhyapara Granite Mining Project MA Rois Siddique said production at the mine totally depends on the quality of development done by Namnam.

Despite repeated attempts, Namnam Project Director Kimm Hui Chun, and Managing Director Richungi could not be contacted.

Sources said Petrobangla officials, annoyed by Namnam's poor performance, are forcibly taking over the project. MGCL officials said they cannot at all rely on Namnam's commitment. The remaining six percent work of the project should take five to six months to be completed but Namnam is so incompetent that it might never be able to complete the job, they said.

The project started with Petrobangla paying 10 percent down payment amounting to \$13.4 million. Namnam began mining upon receiving three of the five instalments in advance and in the next three years Petrobangla paid the remaining two instalments to Namnam.

In June 2001, the Awami League government granted Namnam an extension of its contract for another year along with an additional fund of Tk 207.41 crore.

But the company kept on killing time while receiving payment from Sonali Bank's Dhaka zonal office.

After 18 months of work suspension, the company resumed work as Ecneq approved yet another additional Tk 380 crore in 2003. But the company continued to miss deadlines.

Maddyapara mine will commercially sell 1.65 million tons of granite a year when fully developed. The country annually imports 3.4 million tons of granite. Local production will save revenues between \$38 million and \$58 million. The mine has a life span of 45 years.

Maddyapara granite will however not be cheaper than the rocks that are commonly imported from India because of the increased project cost.

Till date Namnam extracted over 3,50,000 tons of granite and Petrobangla sold nearly 2,00,000 tons of it to consumers.

Oil price hike

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than the formula price.

If the formula were applied, in FY05 the price of kerosene and diesel would be Tk 31 a litre instead of Tk 22. That year too, octane price was Tk 2 more than the formula price.

In the current FY06 the price of kerosene and diesel would be Tk 41 a litre, not Tk 30 as it is. The octane as usual costs Tk 5 more a litre than the formula price.

Since diesel and kerosene constitute the bulk of the imported petroleum products, the government has been providing huge subsidies to keep their prices low in the domestic market. But, the IMF argued the poor have enjoyed only 10 per cent of the subsidy benefits, which went mostly to some 60 per cent people of the upper echelon.

Against this backdrop, the IMF suggested that the government assist the poor through four safety-net programmes -- stipends for secondary schoolgirls, old-age pension, primary education stipends, and the Food for Work -- instead of subsidising oil prices. This way, the Fund argued, the government can offset the adverse

impacts of higher oil prices on the poor.

Both World Bank and IMF have been pressing the government to implement the pricing formula. The last IMF mission categorically said unless the government adjusts oil prices it will not recommend releasing the last PRGF loan tranche to the IMF board.

No piece of land

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selling such sweepers' passages. In view of the notice, brothers and sisters of Justice KM Hasan applied for purchasing the vacant one katha land behind their paternal house at the current market price.

In response to their application, the one katha vacant land was allotted to them.

There is no connection of this piece of land with the house, which the Awami League government had allotted in the name of Sheikh Rehana on July 11, 2001.

Later, the present government cancelled the allotment of the house and set up Dhanmondi Police Station there.

PDB offices

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addressed the rally.

KHULNA
The activists of Jubo Sangram Parishad yesterday laid siege to Khulna Power House and Daulatpur and Phultala PDB offices to protest against frequent power outages.

All officials and employees of the PDB offices remained confined during the two-hour programme that started simultaneously at 11:00am.

In separate rallies held in these three places the speakers warned the government of a tough movement if it failed to ensure uninterrupted power supply.

Militant suspects

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Moudud said the law will not have any provision that conflicts with the constitution.

On a letter of the finance ministry asking the committee to see if the issue of money laundering can be tagged with the new law, the meeting observed that the new law will cover any form of financing of terrorists and terrorism.

When the draft was sent to the cabinet committee for approval on March 13, the committee sent it back with some opinions and asked the law ministry to examine it further after studying the related existing laws.

It also formed the seven-member inter-ministerial committee on April 19 with Moudud as the head and asked it to complete examining the draft by May 18.

Other members of the committee are LGRD Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, Health Minister Khondoker Mosharraf Hossain, Agriculture Minister MK Anwar, Communication Minister Nazmul Huda, Telecommunications Minister Barrister Aminul Haq and State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar.

After their first meeting on April 27, the committee sat yesterday but could not finish examining the draft law. Moudud hoped that it will take another meeting or two to finalise the draft and that it will be passed during the budget session.

Yesterday's meeting attended by Mannan Bhuiyan, Nazmul Huda, Aminul Haq and Babar decided to send a letter to the cabinet secretary seeking extension of time for one month more to complete its task.

Iran offers EU

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light-water reactor as part of a package to induce Tehran to freeze a uranium enrichment programme that the West suspects has military dimensions.

"They say we want to give Iranians incentives but they think they are dealing with a four-year-old, telling him they will give him candies or walnuts and take gold from him in return," Ahmadinejad told a crowd in the central city of Arak.

Arak is the site of a heavy-water nuclear reactor that Iran is building despite opposition from Western countries concerned that the plant's plutonium-by-product could be used in warheads.

"Iran will not accept any suspension or freeze (of nuclear work)," he added in a speech broadcast live on state television.

The EU seeks an end to Iran's nuclear fuel activities as the only credible guarantee that it is not making atomic weapons. Tehran insists it needs the fuel only for power stations.

"We trusted you three years ago and accepted suspension but unfortunately this proved to be a bitter experience in Iranian history. We will not be bitten by the same snake twice," Ahmadinejad declared.

Iran suspended uranium enrichment work in 2003 as a goodwill gesture while it tried to forge a diplomatic solution to the stand-off in talks with France, Germany and Britain.

But the diplomacy failed and Iran resumed work on atomic fuel in August last year.

Ahmadinejad warned that pressure on Iran over its nuclear programme could produce adverse reactions. "Don't force governments and nations which are signatories to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to pull out of it," he said.

Senior diplomats from the EU trio and the office of EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana are now expected to discuss their Iran proposal with US, Russian and Chinese counterparts in London next week, not on Friday as earlier planned.

"The package has not yet been agreed," UnderSecretary of State Nicholas Burns told Reuters. "It is under development and we'll be meeting probably next week in Europe to look at it. I'll be going over

WHO confirms

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ministry said local tests had confirmed a 12-year-old boy from Jakarta who died four days ago was infected with H5N1. Both cases are separate from the Sumatra cases.

Clusters of human infections are worrying because they indicate that the virus might be mutating into a form that is easily transmissible among humans. That, experts say, could spark a pandemic in which millions might die.

For the moment, the virus is mainly a disease in birds and is hard for humans to catch.

The WHO and other health experts are puzzled over the source of infection in the Sumatran family, six of whom have died.

"The possibility that they may have been infected by the same source is still there," said Sari Setiogi, the WHO spokeswoman in Indonesia. More animal samples would be collected for testing.

"Any time we have a cluster, it raises the suspicion that human-to-human transmission may have occurred. We don't rule out either way ... it is too early to make any conclusion because investigations are still going on," Setiogi said.

Saifur suggests

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foreign investors about the cellphone market in Bangladesh the size of which is almost half of the markets of EU countries.

"But discerning the potentials of our market, the mobile phone operators are coming here with their investment," he said.

The minister stressed the need for having a strong telecommunication regulatory body to cope with the open global market.

He said the government opened the mobile market when a single mobile phone company had made the public life "miserable", charging Tk one lakh for getting each cellphone connection.

Saifur pointed out that reduction in customs duty for importing a mobile phone set from Tk 900 to Tk 300 has stopped smuggling of the handsets into the country.

"Many mobile phone set manufacturing companies like Nokia appreciated the move when we brought down the customs duty as it opened up legal business," he informed.

The finance minister emphasised creating skilled manpower in the mobile phone sector so that they can cope with the hi-tech information technology. "If we don't have skilled manpower, the industry will not grow as per expectation," he said, adding the private universities.