

Iraq agrees to truce with Shia militias

74 civilians killed in pipeline fire, scores of others in attacks

AFP, Baghdad

Government forces agreed a truce yesterday with Shia militia fighters after violent clashes south of Baghdad, as Iraq reeled from a three-day bout of bloodshed in cities across the country.

Meanwhile, a string of attacks in the restive town of Baquba left at least 10 dead and a pipeline exploded near Diwaniyah, the town which bore the brunt of Monday's fighting, killing at least 74 civilians as they looted fuel.

Since Saturday -- when Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki hosted a peace conference for tribal leaders -- Iraq has been battered by firefights, bomb attacks and murders, marking one of the most violent periods in recent months.

At least 74 people were killed and 94 injured when an old fuel pipeline caught fire near the southern Iraqi city of Diwaniyah on Tuesday, a senior health official told AFP.

"The latest toll for the tragedy is 74 people killed and 94 injured,"

said Hamid Taathi, head of Diwaniyah's health department.

Scores of Iraqi soldiers and civilians have been killed, along with 10 US soldiers, and government forces had to battle to retain control of the mainly Shia city of Diwaniyah, 180km south of the capital.

Fighting ended overnight, and on Tuesday town councillor Sheikh Ghanim Abid said: "We reached a settlement with Mahdi Army forces to end the confrontation" that officials said had left eight civilians, 20 soldiers and 40 militia dead.

According to Abid, the army agreed not to enter residential areas for three days, the Mahdi Army will withdraw fighters and a militia commander who was arrested at the weekend will be brought to court within 24 hours.

"We are now watching the militia withdrawing. They started pulling out early this morning and they're still going," an Iraqi army captain told AFP.

During Monday's fighting in Diwaniyah, an American F-16 jet dropped a 500 pound (220 kilo)

satellite-guided bomb on an "enemy position" while flying in support of Iraqi and coalition troops, the US air force said.

There was no word on casualties from the air strike.

Shops began to reopen in Diwaniyah on Tuesday and water and electricity supplies were turned back on, as a tense calm returned to the town. On Monday, the battle saw militia take control of several districts.

The head of Diwaniyah's health department, Hamid Taathi, said his hospitals had treated 61 wounded bystanders.

But even as tentative peace returned to Diwaniyah, officials reported a deadly explosion on a fuel pipeline just outside the town.

"We have six bodies in two city hospitals and more than 30 charred bodies are still at the site of the explosion," said Taathi.

A defence ministry official said the pipeline had not been used since 2003 but still contained some

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Continued Violence



PHOTO: STAR

Locals continue to protest Saturday's Phulbari carnage holding a rally at Neemtola intersection yesterday, left; two protesters dismantle the tin roof of a house on the allegation that its owner supports Asia Energy (above, right); a man takes away goods looted from another house.

Saudi bid for Rupali sent for PM's nod

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Privatisation Commission yesterday sent the bid of \$330 million offered by the Saudi prince for buying 67.26 per cent shares of the state-run Rupali Bank to the prime minister for final approval.

On getting the PM's nod, the commission will start negotiations and sign the sell and purchase agreements to wrap up the process of selling Rupali Bank within next month.

The commission approved the bid of Saudi Prince Bandar Bin Mohammad Bin Abdul Rahman Al Saudi on Monday.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court's one-week suspension on the execution of the High Court (HC) order has been extended for another two days. The final hearing of the case will be held on August 31, commission sources said.

The HC on August 21 stayed the procedures of selling Rupali Bank for three months and the Supreme Court issued the one-week suspension on the stay order the next day.

Earlier on Sunday, an evaluation committee comprising representatives from the Bangladesh Bank, finance and law ministries, and consultants from the Privatisation Commission selected two bidders out of four, disqualifying Maa International Investment Ltd of Malaysia, and JJ Finance Ltd of the UK for technical reasons.

The Privatisation Commission declared the Saudi prince's bid the highest out of two technically fit

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RECRUITMENT OF BANGLADESHI WORKERS

Malaysian govt's policy of outsourcing may violate labour rights

PORIMOL PALMA

Two human rights organisations -- Malaysia-based Tenaganita and the Philippines-based Migrant Forum Asia (MFA) -- apprehend that the Malaysian government's policy of using outsourcing companies to recruit Bangladeshi workers would violate basic labour standards and rights.

Recruitment agencies in Bangladesh also expressed similar views privately but declined to go on record.

State Minister for Expatriates' Welfare Lutfur Rahman Khan Azad and Secretary General of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira) Ali Haider avoided questions on this issue at a 'face-to-face' programme organised by an NGO at the Jatiya Press Club on Sunday.

Outsourcing firms supply workers to companies or employers that require them and make all payments to these (outsourcing) firms, which have no responsibilities to the workers.

In the absence of any protective mechanism, the system will only make Malaysia a country that insti-

tutionalises and legalises human trafficking and bonded labour, Tenaganita said in a statement recently.

Endorsing Tenaganita's views, the MFA in a statement demanded an immediate halt to implementation of this recruitment process.

The MFA is a network of over 260 migrant workers associations, trade unions and migrants' rights bodies in Asia.

The statements came in the wake of Malaysia's withdrawal of restrictions on recruitment of workers from Bangladesh after about a decade, and its decision that recruitment would be made by 139 approved outsourcing firms.

Manpower recruiting agencies in Dhaka said about five lakh workers could be sent to Malaysia in 2 to 3 years.

"Outsourcing labour creates a condition of a very deregulated and unprotected form of labour. The Malaysian government, by developing such a policy, institutionalises bonded labour," said Tenaganita in its statement signed by its Director Dr Irene Fernandez.

This form of recruitment and employment of poverty-ridden

migrant workers from countries like Bangladesh, for profit maximisation and unprotected employment, is inhuman, it said.

The statement mentioned that this year alone, Tenaganita received complaints from migrant workers involving 15 outsourcing firms that many of them were neither paid nor had jobs after less than two months of being sent to a company to work.

Ten of the firms refused to send back the workers but demanded from them payment for the levy and work permit and held their passports. These workers were then forced into all forms of work, Tenaganita said. "One worker, under an outsourcing firm, had to work in a furniture company, then in a plantation and a scrap metal company only in a span of three months with no wages."

Another company, Bekaba used gangsters to beat up 42 workers, took all their money when they asked for their wages. The company held passports of all the workers. After this incident, the workers out of sheer fear went back to work.

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Scrap deal with Asia Energy

Demands Citizens' Commission

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Citizens' Commission on Gas, Oil and Coal yesterday demanded immediate cancellation of the contract with Asia Energy Corporation (AEC) and suggested extracting coal only after formulating an acceptable coal policy and following transparent discussions on the project in parliament.

The implementation of Phulbari coalmine project by AEC under the present contract will cause major natural, social and economic catastrophe and drive thousands of people out of their homes in and around the mining area, the commission warned.

Expressing solidarity with the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Electricity and Port and the ongoing movement, the citizens' commission demanded transparent and extensive discussions in the parliamentary standing committee and in parliament before awarding any contract on mineral resources to any company.

At a press conference at the National Press Club, the commission formed by Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA) regretted that the successive governments, in connivance with some vested quarters, have been signing contracts on natural and mineral resources arbitrarily with the foreign companies.

Dr Qazi Kholiquzzaman

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3 criminals killed in 'crossfire'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Kushtia

Three members of the infamous 'Lalchad Bahini' (gang) were killed in separate incidents of shootout between the criminals and the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) in Daulatpur upazila of the district in the last two days.

The dead were identified as Mahbulul Haq, 25, Rezaul Karim Ilu, 32 and Saiful Islam, 42 of Philipnagar of the upazila. The first two were the nephews of the leader of the gang, Lalchad.

Acting on a tip off, a team of Rab-5 of Rajshahi raided the Philipnagar

bazar and surrounded the Philipnagar High School area, some 45 kilometres off the district headquarters, at about 5:30pm on Monday, where some members of the gang were holding a meeting, said a Rab statement.

When the Rab asked the gangsters to surrender, they opened fire on the law enforcers sparking off a half-an-hour long gunfight.

The Rab found the body of Mahbul on the spot after the criminals fled the scene. A foreign revolver and three bullets were also recovered.

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US renews threat of sanctions against Iran

AFP, United Nations

Three days before a UN Security Council deadline for Iran to halt uranium enrichment or face possible sanctions, the United States on Monday again raised the prospect of unilateral sanctions against Tehran.

"The question of what to do about Iran is certainly not confined to the Security Council," US Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton told reporters here, echoing views he already expressed in an interview last week.

"You can envision sanctions

being imposed outside of the Security Council as the United States has unilaterally imposed sanctions on Iraq pursuing to its own statutes ... Other governments can do the same," he said after attending a closed-door meeting on the Darfur crisis.

Late last week, he told the Los Angeles Times newspaper that "everybody's been on board" on the Security Council over Iran but in case Russia and China did not accept any resolution, the United States was working on a parallel diplomatic track.

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CONTAINER JAM C&F agents ransack customs office at ICD

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Angry clearing and forwarding (C&F) agents yesterday went berserk inside the Inland Container Depot (ICD) at Kamalapur and damaged the customs office in protest at a serious backlog of container deliveries.

The agitating C&F agents gathered inside the ICD and brought out processions against the company assigned for container handling.

Witnesses said at around 10:00am yesterday, around 300 demonstrators turned unruly and vandalised eight rooms of customs officials on the second floor in the compound. They also damaged some cranes used for handling containers.

Work in the ICD remained suspended for three hours from 11:00am due to the incident. The operation resumed after the intervention of police who arrived there at around 11:30am.

Angered by the unusual delays

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Prayer Timing		
August 30		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fajr	4-30	5-05
Zohr	12-45	1-15
Asr	4-45	5-00
Maghrib	6-33	6-36
Esha	8-00	8-30

Source: Islamic Foundation

PM's CTG VISIT Commuters trapped in snarl-up

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Thousands of commuters in the port city yesterday faced untold sufferings as a ban was imposed on vehicular movements on some main thoroughfares to ensure security of the prime minister, creating a severe traffic gridlock.

Around eight kilometres of the highway stretching from the Bahaddarhat Bus Terminal to the Agrabad Barik Building roundabout was kept off-limits to all modes of vehicles from 11:30am to 3:00pm for Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's daylong programmes. In addition, the authorities also blockaded the Dewanhat Over Bridge from 2:00pm to 3:00pm.

The prime minister inaugurated the Zia Memorial Complex near Bahaddarhat Bus Terminal at 12noon and the construction work of World Trade Centre (WTC) at around 2:00pm.

The commuters, including students, office-going people, and garments workers were stuck for hours in major parts of the city due

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PHOTO: STAR

Students, workers and others walk to their destinations in Chittagong yesterday as all roads were closed for the prime minister's visit to the port city.

CASE AGAINST ABBAS Hearing held on govt petition for withdrawal

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday heard the government petition for withdrawal of the Constable Abu Naser murder case filed in February 2001 against Housing and Public Works Minister Mirza Abbas, his brother Dhaka City Corporation Ward Commissioner Mirza Khokon and three others.

After hearing both the sides, Judge Mohammad Momin Ullah of the Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court did not issue any order on the matter till late in the evening.

Earlier, on July 17, Public Prosecutor (PP) Abdullah Mahmud Hassan submitted the petition along with a home ministry letter that recommended withdrawal of the case saying it was a "politically motivated" one.

The petition also sought withdrawal of charges against three others -- Shahab Uddin Laitu, former president of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal, student wing of the ruling BNP, Yusuf bin Jaill and Abu Iqbal.

However, the trial of the case

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