

Militia mortar attack destroys US ammo dump in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi militia fired a mortar round into a US military base in Baghdad, triggering a thunderous series of explosions that destroyed an ammunition dump and rocked the entire city.

The munitions store in Forward Operating Base Falcon was still burning yesterday, more than 13 hours after the strike set off a blaze that lit up the night sky and spread panic in the already shell-shocked Iraqi capital.

"Intelligence indicates that civilians aligned with a militia organisation were responsible for last night's mortar attack," said US army Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Withington, spokesman for Multinational Division Baghdad.

Surprisingly, there were no reports of casualties among the more than 2,000 US military and civilian personnel at the camp, nor among the citizens of Baghdad, whose night was disturbed by several hours of terrifying detonations.

"At the beginning we heard an ordinary explosion. We thought the Americans had fired at something, but I went out of the house and saw fire from inside the base," said Abu Sajad, who lives near the base with 24 relatives.

"The explosions got stronger and stronger. Two window panes were broken in my house. Rockets were flying here and there, some of them far away. The fire went down then renewed again. Then there was a big explosion.

"We could not sleep all night. We went into two rooms in the middle of the house for safety. My brother put cotton wool in four of the children's ears. We hugged them to comfort them," he said.

Withington said engineers and firefighters were working to quell the flames and make the remaining munitions safe.

"The fire ignited tank, artillery and small-arms ammunition at a forward operating base in the central Rasheed district of Baghdad," he said, explaining that the 82mm mortar round was fired from Abu T-Shir, a Shiite district.

"Soldiers and base employees

were moved immediately to the safety of hardened buildings and structures on the base," a coalition statement said.

"Firefighters from the base and hazardous material experts will continue to work toward extinguishing the fire. Engineers and explosive ordnance detachment teams will begin deliberate clearance of potential unexploded ordnance."

While there were no reports of US casualties, the explosions marked a rare success for mortar teams working for militia and insurgent groups, which rarely cause much damage to well-protected US facilities.

Given the nature of the attack and the direction from which the shell was fired, suspicion will fall on Shiite militia groups such as the Mahdi Army, a loosely organised armed group loyal to radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

The blaze broke out at around 10:40 pm (1940 GMT) on Tuesday and shortly afterwards a steady drumbeat of explosions could be heard as far as five kilometres (2.4 miles) away in the city centre.

Government spokesmen appeared on state television to urge calm and quash rumours that the city was under attack.

Iraqi officials said shells "cooking off" in the fire had crashed down in five areas in the south of the city, but the interior ministry said there did not seem to have been any casualties outside the base.

State television showed live pictures of a blazing inferno lighting up the night sky from the south side of the metropolis.

US troops in Baghdad are taking part in Operation Together Forward, along with more than 40,000 Iraqi personnel, to quell an eight-month-old outbreak of sectarian bloodletting between rival Sunni and Shiite factions.

Despite the security plan, United Nations and Iraqi officials estimate that more than 100 people are killed each day, more than at any time since the invasion, and Baghdad's streets are littered with corpses daily.

Railways

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"Actually we did not have much to do when all the workers and employees engaged in operating trains were either forced to stop work or did so willingly," Divisional Railway Manager Ibrahim Khalil Ullah told The Daily Star.

They forced out all the on-duty managers from cabin controls (from where trains get clearance) and the operators from signal boxes to keep those under lock and key, he said.

Our Rajshahi correspondent reports that the striking staff started gathering at Rajshahi railway station early in the morning and demonstrated there for about five hours.

They prevented movement of all local and inter-city trains from Rajshahi and locked the booking office, ticket counters and the station master's office.

Later, they brought out a procession and held a rally on the BR west zonal office premises. They drove out all officials and employees from their offices.

Our Nilphamari correspondent reports: About four thousand agitating workers and employees of Saidpur railway division besieged three inter-city trains at Saidpur station and stopped all activities at the country's largest railway workshop at Saidpur.

They prevented all officials and employees of the workshop from entering it.

Our Sylhet correspondent says no trains could ply to and from the city during the 12-hour strike. All offices at the railway station also remained closed.

Madhyapara

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cost in the first project profile (PP) was Tk.650 crore.

Namnam signed the contract with Petrobangla in March 2004 under a North Korean supplier's credit project. Repeated delays by Namnam cost the government an additional Tk 600 crore, according to our sources.

This year, the project was supposed to go on test run in June, but failed due to technical glitches. Then the deadline for the test run was extended to October, added the sources.

Targeted extraction of granite from the mine is around 1.65 million tonnes per year and the duration of the project is set for 46 years.

Outlaws

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Narail in one day. Later, one Rony Biswas, who was a leader of Janajuddha then and now the chief of PBCP-Communist War, called journalists over telephone and claimed responsibility for the killings termed them 'revenge killings'.

Police in Khulna range were put on high alert and security in the region was beefed up following the four murders.

"Police are searching for the source of the phone calls," a police high official of Khulna told The Daily Star yesterday.

There are at least 12 outlawed parties in the region who have around 1,000 illegal firearms in their possession, sources said.

The parties are: PBCP-ML, PBCP-Janajuddha, PBCP-Red Flag, PBCP-Communist War, Biplabi Communist Party, New Biplabi Communist Party, Banglar Communist Party, Gono Mukti Fouj, Gono Bahini, Socialist Party, Biplabi Anuragi and Chhinnamul Communist Party.

At least 352 outlaws including several top leaders of the parties were killed in the region in so-called 'encounter and crossfire' incidents with law enforcers since June 2004.

Of them, at least 215 were from Janajuddha, the largest outlawed party in the region.

Babar, IG

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complainant, took the complaint into cognisance and ordered judicial probe into the matter.

The accused include State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar, IGP Anwarul Iqbal, Deputy Director of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) Abdul Aziz Sarker, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Commissioner SM Mizanur Rahman and Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Tejgaon Kohinur Miah.

The other accused are five additional IGs of different departments, two DIGs, six DCs, 11 ADs, 33 ACs, 17 officers-in-charge (OCs) of different police stations, 12 inspectors, 20 sub-inspectors (SIs) and 700 police members of various ranks.

As per the directives of Babar and Anwarul Iqbal, a team of police led by DC Kohinur Miah attacked and clubbed a Jubo Ainjibi League procession in front of Rapa Plaza on Road No 27 in Dhanmondi from 12:30pm to 2:00pm on September 6, Uzzal said in his complaint.

Their merciless beating left Awami League (AL) lawmaker Haji Selim, the complainant and a large number of leaders and activists wounded. They also assaulted Jubo Mahila League leaders and activists leaving Upu Ukil and Advocate Tarana Halim hurt, Uzzal added.

Following the incident, Jubo Ainjibi League leaders and activists went to file a case but Dhanmondi police refused to entertain it, the complainant said.

Advocates Syed Rezaur Rahman, Sahara Khatun, Nuruzzaman Nani, Abdul Baten, Kamrul Islam, Barrister Sadia Arman and Abdur Rahman Howlader moved the case on behalf of the complainant.

BTRC in a hurry

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"Moreover, without a common platform, nobody will know how much the VoIP operators are earning. It is ridiculous to expect that they will give genuine revenue reports to the government and pay taxes," said an industry insider.

"If the BTRC finds it okay to award VoIP licenses now without a common platform, why did it not award the licences three years ago as it had committed earlier? What made it so different for the BTRC to award the licenses now?" asked an official.

The BTTC in a letter to the telecoms ministry said it believes that the BTRC move is against the earlier decision of the government. The very purpose of legalising VoIP will now be at stake, the BTTC says.

It says that once the operators are allowed to execute internet telephony without a common platform, it will be almost impossible to bring them to such a platform afterwards.

In January 2004, the BTRC announced legalising VoIP and awarding of licenses within two months. Illegal VoIP operation is eating up several hundred crores of taka and is playing a leading role in money laundering since 2000. But the BTRC mysteriously remained silent.

Top illegal VoIP operators include young political top notches while an unscrupulous section of BTTC officials and a couple of mobile phone companies assist in this operation.

Now, as the tenure of the alliance government is due to expire this month, the BTRC invited applications for VoIP licenses on September 21 with the last date being October 8. Sources said a good number of applications have been filed with the BTRC, which plans to award the licenses as soon as possible. But a common platform through which international calls will be channelised is yet to be set up.

Meanwhile, vested interest groups using their political influence slowed down the BTTC's move to set up a common platform. The BTTC has floated tender twice and is now going for a third tender for this job.

As per the BTTC recommendation, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) approved setting up of a common platform in May last year to ensure a controlled internet telephony. In two rounds of tender floating, the BTTC received good offers but each time vested interest groups forced it to pick up flawed bids.

The first tender was floated last year and the second earlier this year. In the second tender, the BTTC picked up a bid of Chinese company Huawei, represented by the youngest son of a very powerful minister.

Following a formal complaint

All-party

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actions on political parties, violation of human rights, August 21 grenade attacks and May 21 grenade attack on the British High Commissioner and extra-judicial killings.

The meeting held deliberation on the report compiled by Robert Templar, Asia programme director of Daily Telegraph International Crisis Group. Former British Minister Jeremy Corbin, British Parliament Human Rights Committee Chairman Lord Ebury, APPG Member Selly Cable MP, Heriqueen MP and former Bangladesh law minister Abdul Matin Khasru were, among others, took part in the deliberations.

Representatives of Bangladesh High Commission in London were present.

Chief adviser, EC

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Citing the past election commission, the prime minister said the previous government (AL) had appointed partisan and controversial people to the Election Commission despite their protests, but their demand went unheeded.

Khaleda, also chairperson of the ruling BNP, scoffed at her political opponents, saying that "it is good to dream but not in a zigzag way...there is no scope for assuming power through any zigzag course."

Accusing the opposition of trying to foil the coming polls, she said since they have no chances of going to power through election, they are conspiring to snatch people's voting and democratic rights.

The prime minister asserted that "elections were held in the past and it will again be held in 2007...the only way to go to power is election. Those who will get electoral mandate will form the government."

In an oblique reference to the tribal and non-tribal conflicts in the hill tracts, Khaleda said tribal and settlers—all are the citizens of Bangladesh.

She urged them to work unitedly for development of the CHT, especially for making the hill districts attractions for local and foreign tourists.

Chaired by Rangamati BNP President Nazimuddin Ahmed, the rally was also addressed among others, by Prime Minister's Parliamentary Affairs Advisor Salahuddin Qader Chowdhury, State Minister Amanullah Aman, Prime Minister's Political Secretary Harris Chowdhury and State Minister Moni Swapan Dewan.

Earlier, she addressed a rally at Khagrachhari High School ground

from a bidder, the planning ministry in March categorically recommended blacklisting Huawei for corrupt practices to win the contract. Such blacklisting should be done as per "Regulation 15" of the Public Procurement Regulations (PPR), the ministry said.

Instead of taking decision as per the planning ministry recommendation, the telecoms ministry sat on it, and in August approved Huawei's \$3.5 million bid to set up the platform in Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet and Bogra through which internet phone calls will be channelised.

But following reports on this The Daily Star, the PMO cancelled the Huawei bid and directed the BTTC to re-tender the scheme. BTTC sources said preparations for re-tender is now at a final stage.

Mufti Hannan

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The accused along with their accomplices hurled petrol bombs on the family members of Bazlur Rahman that left his wife Bilkis Begum, daughter-in-law Achhia Begum and a relative Masum wounded. So, they need to be remanded for quizzing to find out the clues about the killing, the IO said.

After the hearing, Metropolitan Magistrate ABM Abdul Fattah granted the proposed remand sought by the IO of the case.

Earlier on September 10, Hannan was shown arrested in the Ramna Batamul blast case and placed on a 13-day remand for interrogation. On September 19, he was shown arrested in connection with the bomb blasts at the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) rally at Paltan on January 20, 2001, and placed on a 14-day remand in two phases.

Hasan

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quoting the negotiators who are also trying to coax Justice Hasan into clearing his position by issuing a statement that he is not bias to any political party.

Although the ruling BNP has remained rigid on its stance on Justice Hasan issue, it may ultimately compromise on leaving the issue upon the president's consideration following expiry of its tenure.

"We will not give the opposition alliance scopes to celebrate victory in the streets by recognising their demands on Justice Hasan issue," a senior BNP leader told The Daily Star.

There is no way but to continue the dialogue until reaching a consensus. The ruling BNP secretary general and AL general secretary claimed on Tuesday that they have become "very closer" on many issues.

The opposition alliance is waiting for the outcome of the dialogue, refraining from street agitations at the moment to press home their demands for reforms in the caretaker government system, Election Commission and electoral laws.

The opposition leader already called upon people to throng the capital with whatever they have on the day Justice Hasan assumes office as the chief adviser to make the Hasan-led caretaker government unable to function.

The AL has also directed its grassroots level leaders to make preparations for launching vigorous agitation if its demand is not met.

SSB promotes

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have also been recommended for upper posts, sources said. The recommendations would be sent to the PMO for approval and a circular will be published within a couple of days, they added.

Sources also said that there are still around 600 deputy secretaries against the posts of around 400 at present. The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General has been repeatedly giving objections to this, saying that they face difficulties to maintain the wages, as the number of the officials is higher than the approved posts.

Meanwhile, seven foreign ministry officials, now posted in Bangladesh missions abroad, have also been recommended for elevation to director general (joint secretary) with postings at the ministry. They are Sabbir Ahmed, Zulfiqer Rahman, Tareq Ahsan, Mashfi Binte Shams, Sufia Rahman, Sheikh Sekandar Ali and Wahidur Rahman.

They are now awaiting the approval of the prime minister, official sources said.

2nd Meghnaghat

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which in this case is encashment of Orion-Belhasa's bid bond of \$10 million.

However, the alliance government's favourite consortium last week sent a letter asking the PDB to set either October 11 or October 12 as the date for signing the LLA. There was no signing yesterday and the PDB was yet to decide on the signing today.

PDB sources said a decision may be taken on the signing this morning.

Industry insiders said the consortium was finding difficulties in arranging funds for the power project and that is why has been avoiding the LLA.

Bon Consortium directors Salman Obaidul Kabir and K Mojibul Hoque, however, claimed to The Daily Star that it has not dodged the signing of the LLA due to fund constraints.

It was rather deferred because of delays in signing of the Gas Sales Agreement (GSA) with Petrobangla, they said. The GSA signing, which must precede the LLA, was signed on September 24.

Orion never actually gave the bid that was selected for this power project and it actually submitted its name as one of the two partners of a Japanese bidder named Nisso Eiwi, which has the experience to qualify for building such power plants. But Nisso disappeared from the scene in 2004 and Orion brought in another German company, Steag, showing it as the lead bidder.

The government initially rejected such gross anomaly but then with pressure from the "alternative powerhouse"—the source of power of Orion—the government accepted and approved the bid by August last year.

The Bon Consortium is apparently a Bangladeshi registered project company. The claimed owners of the consortium are Orion Power Company and BN Corporation. Orion Power Company Ltd is a Bangladeshi company owned by Obaidul Karim. The company was created for this project.

Protesters

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At one stage police reportedly began to club the agitating people, leaving five to six injured.

Police held Md Shamsheer, 25, a machine operator of Rupali Art Press at Anderkilla who was in the crowd and started beating him severely, witnesses said.

Police picked him along with the snatcher and took them to the Kotwali Police Station.

Aggrieved staffs and owners of Anderkilla and Shahi Jame Mosque market put up barricades at four points of the intersection, causing serious congestion on the adjoining streets.

Demanding Shamsheer's immediate release, they brought out procession and damaged two buses, two private cars, three CNG auto-rickshaws and hurled stones at a police pick-up and two police sergeants when they were passing the area.

The mob withdrew the barricade after police released Shamsheer at around 1:30pm.

"Policemen gave me some more beating in their pick-up all over my body putting off my clothes and locked me up inside the police station while they did not even touch the snatcher," Shamsheer told The Daily Star.

When contacted, Officer-in-Charge of Kotwali Police Station Md Moinuddin said police picked up the press staff by mistake.

Tigers kill 38 Lanka

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Tamil Tiger attacks. Naval gun ships were deployed to prevent rebels sending reinforcements by sea to the peninsula.

The army said in a statement that it evacuated the wounded from the battle field in the afternoon, about seven hours into the offensive, when the "intensity of the confrontations dwindled." Thorfinnur Omarsson, a spokesman for the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, said it had information that the fighting had died down by mid-day. Both sides in the conflict said the offensive was launched just before dawn.

"The offensive, shattering peace hopes, comes few hours after an official announcement by Norway that parties had agreed to meet in Switzerland from 28 to 29 October," the pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website said.

Norway has been working to save a 2002 truce and end spiralling violence, which has claimed over 2,200 lives since December, according to an official tally.

Some 60,000 people have been killed overall in the three-decade-old conflict between minority Tamils seeking an independent homeland and government forces.

October's planned talks represent the latest attempt to quell the recent bloody upsurge in violence.

"It is crucial that the government and the LTTE now use this opportunity to cease hostilities," Erik

AL protests

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life in USA, the AL leader threw a question to Tarique how he set up several companies when he had not 'shelter' after Zia's death.

Referring to Tarique's Monday comments over purchasing a house in Texas, USA, by a family member of Sheikh Hasina, who is also the opposition leader, Quader termed the comments as 'untrue, indecent and objectionable'.

Reading out a written speech, Quader said the prime minister's family now own 2,000 acres of state property and luxurious houses in Dubai, London and New York.

Besides, they bought thousands of acres of land in different parts of the country. The nation wants to know the sources of that money, the AL leader said.

On Tarique's comments on Hasina's leadership, Quader said it is not AL, but the ruling BNP that needs a change in its leadership as grass roots level BNP leaders and activists feel ashamed to face public due to unbridled corruption of Khaleda Zia and her son.

AL leaders Mukul Bose, Abdul Mannan, Mahmudur Rahman Manna, Aktheruzzaman, Abdul Mannan Khan, Habibur Rahman Siraj, Nazma Rahman, Minal Kanti Das, Ajoy Kor Khokon, among others, attended the press conference.

North Korea

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Along the razor-wired no-man's-land separating the divided Koreas, communist troops were more boldly trying to provoke their southern counterparts: spitting across the demarcation line, making throat-slashing hand gestures, flashing their middle finger and trying to talk to the troops, said U.S. Army Maj. Jose DeVaronna of Fayetteville, N.C., adding that the overall situation was calm.

On the streets of North Korea's capital, it seemed like business as usual. Video by AP Television News showed people milling about Kim Il Sung square in Pyongyang and rehearsing a performance for the 80th anniversary of the "Down with Imperialism Union."

South Korean Defense Minister Yoon Kwang-ung said that Seoul could enlarge its conventional arsenal to deal with a potentially nuclear-armed North Korea.

Scientists and other governments have said Monday's underground test has yet to be confirmed, with some experts saying the blast was significantly smaller than even the first nuclear bombs dropped on Japan during World War II.

North Korea appeared to respond to that Wednesday, saying in its statement that it "successfully conducted an underground nuclear test under secure conditions."

In rare direct criticism of the communist regime from Seoul, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun said the security threat cited by North Korea "either does not exist in reality, or is very exaggerated," according to South Korea's Yonhap news agency.

He spoke even as South Korea's military was checking its readiness for nuclear attack, Yonhap said. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended improving the military's defenses, possibly with state-of-the-art weapons to destroy nuclear missiles, the report said.

The top U.S. general in South Korea said that American forces are fully capable of deterring an attack despite the North's still-unconfirmed nuclear test.

"Be assured that the alliance has the forces necessary to deter aggression, and should deterrence fail, decisively defeat any North Korean attack against" South Korea, U.S. Army Gen. B.B. Bell said in a statement to troops. "U.S. forces have been well-trained to confront nuclear, biological and chemical threats."

About 29,500 U.S. soldiers are deployed in the South, a remnant of the 1950-53 Korean War that ended in a cease-fire, not a formal peace treaty.

Solheim, Norway's top peace broker, said.

Norway's statement on the talks was followed by an announcement by Japan, the island's main aid donor, that it will dispatch special envoy Yasushi Akashi on Sunday to try and boost peace efforts.

Akashi was scheduled to meet officials from both sides "with a view to enhancing this constructive effort and will also exchange views on the peace process and its future," the Japanese embassy said.

Sri Lanka's tiny stock market, which had gained on the back of possible peace talks, went into reverse Wednesday, falling just over half-a-percentage-point.

The LTTE had warned it would reconsider its decision to go to Switzerland for talks if the military launched fresh attacks. The government had said it agreed to talks on the basis that it could defend itself from rebel attacks.

12 killed

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workers from France and Luxembourg were at the scene by the early afternoon, trying to extract the injured from the wreckage, as a helicopter shuttled victims to hospital.

"It's apocalyptic. There's a mess of steel and tangled metal, with wagons up-ended and pointing into the sky," said Bertrand Mertz, vice-president of the Lorraine regional council.

Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who was en route to the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, ordered his plane to return to France in order to visit the scene. President Jacques Chirac issued a statement to express his condolences to the bereaved.

The two trains were a double-decker Luxembourg regional express train travelling south to the French city of Nancy, and a freight train heading north into Luxembourg.

"As a result of the work only one track was open instead of two, and trains were supposed to wait their turn to go on it. For reasons that are not clear, these two trains came together head-to-head," an SNCF spokesman said.

Guillaume Pepy, SNCF executive director, said the French freight train was the first onto the section of track, and that its driver had not broken a red light.

Earlier Mertz told France 3 television that railway signallers in Luxembourg were to blame.

France's last serious rail accident was in 2002 when 12 died in a fire on a night train near Nancy.

Over 7,000 sued

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around 3,000 garment workers. Of them, 116 were named while the rest were unidentified. Out of the 116 named accused, 13 were arrested during Tuesday's clashes.

In Pallabi, the police filed one and owners of three RMG factories filed another case with Pallabi Police Station yesterday accusing around 3,000 unidentified garment workers for vandalising factories and vehicles and for assaulting police.

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