

Lebanon violence could spread

Fears ME leaders

AFP, Cairo

The assassination of an anti-Syrian Lebanese minister has sent tremors through the Middle East, with leaders voicing fears yesterday of further unrest in Lebanon and beyond.

While governments scrambled to condemn the murder of Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel and Syria expressed outrage that fingers were swiftly pointed in its direction, the full impact of the killing was still being assessed in Middle Eastern capitals.

Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa described the killing as a "terrorist assassination".

"This operation is condemned in the strongest way, as it could lead to turmoil in the country," said Moussa, who is expected to attend Gemayel's funeral on Thursday.

Gemayel, a 34-year-old Maronite Christian, was gunned down in a Beirut suburb on Tuesday, the highest-profile killing in a series of assassinations and attacks since the April 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon.

His grandfather was the founder of the right-wing Phalangist party -- one of the main protagonists in Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war --

and his uncle was assassinated in 1982, days before being sworn in as president.

Lebanese Social Affairs Minister Nayla Moawad -- whose husband Rene was assassinated just 17 days after becoming president in 1989 -- and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt openly accused Syria of being behind Gemayel's murder.

But Syria's ambassador in Washington, Imad Mustapha, categorically denied his country's involvement in the assassination and argued that the string of killings was also harming Syria.

Israel, which fought a war this summer with Lebanon's Syrian and Iran-backed Hezbollah Shia militia, quickly denied it had a hand in the killing.

"The struggle continues in Lebanon, and Israel is not involved," Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres told Israeli public radio.

"It's a struggle between Hezbollah, which wants to see an Iranian Lebanon, and the majority of Lebanese who want a sovereign Lebanon... We need to monitor the situation closely."

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert expressed fears of regional repercussions in a telephone conversation Tuesday with his Italian counterpart, Romano Prodi.

Aggrieved officials

FROM PAGE 16

secretaries and senior assistant secretaries are posted as divisional commissioners, deputy commissioners and upazila nirbahi officers on seniority basis for the next 68 days for conducting election, it will not create any misgivings among the political parties, they said.

The officials led by Abu Alam Md Shaheed Khan, Shameem Chowdhury, Abul Kalam Azad and Kazi Ansar Uddin also demanded immediate transfer of all 'desk level officers' from the establishment ministry, home ministry, Cabinet Division and Election Commission Secretariat.

They expressed their frustration at the caretaker government's 'failure' to ensure neutrality in the administration and 'dilly-dally' in case of promotions and transfers.

The officials stressed immediate formulation of a policy guideline for transfer and promotion, and its proper implementation.

They complained to the adviser that the previous BNP-led coalition government ousted hundreds of officials from service or made them OSDs (officer on special duty) in gross violation of rules and regulations.

Officials who were given special facilities during the coalition rule still continue to hold vital posts, they alleged.

Blockade continues

FROM PAGE 1

withdrawn and alliance adherents attended the rally.

Shibir activists gathered at the north gate of Baitul Mokarram mosque at 11:00am and held a rally there blocking the Paltan-Motijheel road.

While a procession of JCD and Shibir was marching to Mukhtangon area, they attacked JP leaders and activists near a JP stage set up at Bijoyanagar. Twenty-two people including JP leader Kazi Jafar Ahmed were injured during the incident. Rab and police quickly controlled the situation.

City wing of AL and its front organisations, Jatiya Mohila Jote, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, Gono Forum, Workers Party of Bangladesh, Communist Party of Bangladesh, Shramik Malik Oikya Jote, Liberal Democratic Party, Islami Oikya Jote, Jaker Party and Jatiya Party held rallies on Bangabandhu Avenue.

The number of motorised vehicles on the streets increased further from the morning yesterday.

"We don't think there will be any violence," Rafiqul Islam, driver of a Motijheel-bound bus, told this correspondent at Abdullahpur bus stand in Uttara in the morning.

The number of passengers also increased noticeably at all the bus stoppages and several of them said they had no alternative to defying the blockade. "My office considered the situation the first couple of days. But it is possible to remain absent at offices for days together?" NGO worker AKM Azad said at Mohakhali when he was going to his office at Gulshan-2.

Despite the increase in the number of passenger buses on the streets, rickshaws, CNG-run three-wheelers and taxicabs predominated the streets where there was no blockade.

No long-route bus left Gabtoli and Sayedabad bus terminals during the last three days while only three buses left for Mymensingh from Mohakhali bus terminal on insistence from passengers.

In Mirpur, blockaders chased a Gulistan-bound bus when it reached near Mirpur-10 roundabout at 10:30am. As a brickbat thrown by the chasers hit helper Babu in the face, he fell down from the bus, witnesses said. He was rushed to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead.

Mirpur police, however, said Babu was run over by a microbus when he was crossing the road hurriedly after getting down from his bus as pickets were chasing the bus.

COUNTRY

The blockade programme was observed peacefully in different districts while it added to people's sufferings.

Ten trains remained halted at Rajshahi railway station, two at Sreepur and Kawsa in Gazipur and five in Brahmanbaria.

No bus plied on Dhaka-Chittagong and Dhaka-Sylhet routes while no vehicle plied over the Jamuna Bridge.

Iraqi deaths hit new high, many emigrate

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraqi deaths hit a new high in October and 100,000 people are fleeing abroad every month to escape worsening violence that is segregating the country on sectarian lines, a UN report said on Wednesday.

Painting a grim picture of a population caught in the cross-fire between insurgents, militias, criminal gangs and security forces, the bimonthly report put civilian deaths in October at 3,709 -- 120 a day and up from 3,345 in September.

The White House announced that President George W. Bush would meet Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in Jordan next week to discuss transferring greater security responsibility to US-trained Iraqi forces, a key demand of the Iraqi government.

British forces could hand over the key southern oil city of Basra, which generates almost all of Iraq's revenues, and the rest of Basra province to Iraqi forces by next spring, British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett said in London.

Khaleda

FROM PAGE 1

employment.

Chaired by Agriculturists Association of Bangladesh (AAB) President Javed Iqbal, the exchange of opinion meeting was addressed, among others, by former agriculture minister and BNP Vice-Chairman MK Anwar, Jatiyatabadi Krishak Dal General Secretary Shamsuzzaman Dudu, former state minister for civil aviation Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, agriculturists Prof Golam Ali Fakir, Prof Ibrahim Khalil, Golam, Asaduzzaman, Shamimur Rahman and Hasan ZafriTuhin.

4-party to submit memo

FROM PAGE 1

He alleged the AL is trying to destroy all institutions in the country.

He cautioned the people that "Democracy, economy and even independence will be at stake if they (AL) comes to power again."

BNP Standing Committee member Moudud Ahmed said the CG must act as per the constitution regarding reconstitution of the EC.

Mayor of Dhaka and city BNP President Sadeque Hossain Khoka, who chaired the rally, said, "We only want election quickly, no matter who is chief election commissioner."

Jamaat Secretary General Ali Ahsan Mujahid demanded said election schedule must be announced without further delay.

Other speakers included Mirza Abbas, Gayeshwar Chandra Roy and Aman Ullah Aman of BNP, Bangladesh Jatiya Party leader Golam Mostafa, Islami Oikya Jote leaders Abdul Latif Nezami and Ahmad Abdul Quader.

Star reporter

FROM PAGE 1

Bilu, who could not identify the attackers, said he also heard another attacker asking his fellowmen to shoot him. He, however, did not see any firearm with them.

A rally of the BNP-led four-party alliance was taking place on the same road. Witnesses said many of the rally-goers were carrying bamboo sticks and that the youths were among those who had been guarding the rally.

Alleging that the attack was a planned one, the journalists at the protest rally threatened to go for tougher movement if the attackers are not arrested within 24 hours.

Journalists of Rajshahi also demanded arrest of the miscreants.

Rajshahi Metropolitan Press Club President Shaiful Islam and Secretary Anisuzzaman in a joint statement said the "vile and atrocious" attack by the cadres of the four-party alliance proved the party's stand against democracy and freedom of speech.

Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) President Manzurul Ahsan Bulbul and Secretary General Abdul Jalil Bhuiyan, and Dhaka Union of Journalists (DUJ) President Altaf Mahmud and General Secretary Omar Faruk in a joint statement condemned and protested the attack on Bilu.

Rajshahi Union of Journalists (RUJ), Rajshahi Press Club, Rajshahi City Press Club also expressed their concern over the attack.

Acting CEC

FROM PAGE 1

their 11-point demand is met.

AL General Secretary and 14-party Coordinator Abdul Jalil told reporters that they will not accept any EC reconstitution if CEC MA Aziz and Election Commissioner SM Zakaria are replaced by any "controversial" persons.

"The Election Commission must be reconstituted with non-party and neutral persons acceptable to all," Jalil said, emphasising that a free and fair election is never possible under the supervision of the current "controversial" EC.

"Although the advisers to the caretaker government promised to bring an end to the ongoing political impasse through an acceptable reconstitution of the EC, we have not yet seen any such measure being taken," Jalil said.

He asked President and Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed to take necessary measures to bring reforms in the systems of the caretaker government and EC and the electoral laws as proposed by the 14-party alliance.

The removal of CEC Aziz and Election Commissioner Zakaria is a must for a free and fair election, Jalil said, asking the president to appoint persons acceptable to all in the posts of Aziz and Zakaria.

Jalil also demanded that the chief adviser give the charges of important ministries to other advisers and take "combined" decision after discussion with them to create the environment for a free and fair election.

He alleged that in spite of repeated demands from the 14-party alliance Iajuddin has not yet taken any measure to reshuffle in the administration.

The chief adviser has rather appointed Khoda Bux Chowdhury, who is loyal to BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, as the inspector general of police, Jalil said.

The deputy commissioners, superintendents of police, officers-in-charge, and upazila nirbahi officers appointed during the previous government's tenure have not been withdrawn yet to depoliticise the administration, he said, demanding immediate drastic change in both the police and civil administration.

Jalil alleged that the BNP-Jamaat coalition has been conspiring to foil the upcoming election by creating anarchy in the country and resorting to criminal activities.

Senior 14-party leaders Syedur Sajeda Chowdhury, Abdur Razzak, Tofail Ahmed, Suranjit Sengupta, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, Obaidul Quader, Rashed Khan Menon, and Hasanul Haque Inu were present at the briefing.

3 outlaws killed

FROM PAGE 16

In Pabna, a top BPCP Lal Pataka outlaw was killed in a 'shootout' with Rab at Sreepur village under sadar upazila, reports our Pabna correspondent.

The dead was identified as Abdus Samad alias Lorika Samad, son of Saken Pramanik of the Horinarayanpur village under the same upazila.

Samad and his gang fired on a Rab 12 team as they raided Sreepur village at around 11:00am prompting Rab to return fire, Rab said.

Samad was bullet-hit during the 'shootout' and died after he was taken to Pabna General Hospital, claimed Rab.

Sources said, Samad turned the commander of PBCP Lal Pataka faction in Pabna after its central leader Kamrul Master died few months ago in a 'shootout' with Rab.

In Kushtia, an activist of PBCP was killed in a 'shootout' with police in 'housing area' of the town at noon, reports our Kushtia correspondent.

The victim was identified as Mezbaur Rahman, son of Atab Uddin Mondol of Kumargara under sadar upazila.

According to police, a team of Rab 6 arrested Mezbaur from Kushtia judge court premises at around 11:00am.

Mezbaur was then taken to Kushtia Rab office for interrogation. Rab handed over the criminal to sadar police after he confessed to having firearms hidden in different areas.

Later police took him along to housing area to recover the hidden firearms.

As the police reached the area at around 4:00pm, the Mezbaur's accomplices opened fire on them prompting police to return fire that triggered a half-hour long 'shootout', police said.

Mejbaur was shot and died on the spot while trying to escape police custody, claimed police.

Police recovered an Italian made pistol and 14 bullets from the spot.

Mejbaur was accused in different criminal cases including seven for murder filed with different police stations in Kushtia, police said.

Aziz's decision

FROM PAGE 1

holding of a fair and acceptable election.

"Maintenance of law and order is a precondition to holding free and fair elections," Iajuddin said. He ordered the officials concerned to maintain law and order and carry out their responsibilities neutrally by rising above "fear and intimidation".

Iajuddin said the law enforcement agencies should take utmost care that innocent people are not subjected to harassment.

The president said the country has suffered an irreparable economic loss besides misery of the people during the last few days for some activities in the name of realising various demands. It has cast an adverse impact on the investment climate.

"We have been identified to the international community in a different way following the untold misery and worry caused to the people," he said in an oblique reference to the blockade programme of the Awami League-led 14-party alliance.

He hoped that all political parties and quarters will play a responsible role taking in account future of the country.

Iajuddin said the interim government could not concentrate on its routine work because of the political standoff persisting for the last few days. As a result, "a few dishonest people and quarters tried to aggravate the miseries by raising the price of essentials".

He informed the nation that he has instructed his advisers to concentrate more on their respective ministries and bring back discipline in public life and ensure the existence of an elected government.

The president in his emotion-charged speech said, "We have established democracy by overcoming all odds and obstacles. It is the responsibility of all of us to uphold the national independence and democratic process."

He said it is the responsibility of the government to ensure peace in public life and accelerate the economic activities.

"To perform this onerous responsibility we will have to do whatever necessary in accordance with the constitution for ensuring the welfare of the country and the people."

Iajuddin sought all-out cooperation from the people in discharge of the responsibility of the caretaker government. "I hope all the citizens and political parties will extend their sincere cooperation in discharging the responsibility. Insha Allah, we will be able to present a nice and acceptable election to the nation with combined efforts of all those involved in the election process."

"We must be vigilant so that no individual or party can create obstruction to discharging our responsibility."

"We have no alternative but to hold the election to parliament to maintain democratic dispensation and uphold the constitution," Iajuddinsaid.

The president hoped that the Election Commission will take all measures under the constitution for holding the election within the stipulated time.

He gave details of various administrative measures the caretaker government have taken since taking office on October 29 towards holding free and fair polls. So far, 30 secretaries and acting secretaries, 20 additional secretaries, 53 joint secretaries and 52 deputy secretaries have been given transfers and postings. Besides, all divisional commissioners, 57 deputy commissioners and 255 upazila nirbahi officers have either been withdrawn, transferred or posted to new stations.

Inspectors general of police (IGP), deputy inspector generals (DIG), superintendents of police (SP), officers-in-charge (OC) and others engaged in law enforcement activities have also been transferred or given fresh postings. Moreover, necessary instructions have been issued for the national mass media to disseminate news and programmes neutrally, the president said.

Festivity marks

FROM PAGE 1

Monday's meeting with the CEC. The city, it seemed, started rocking with the zeal of the 14-party activists who were on movement for a longtime.

The third phase of the blockade starting on November 20 was not like the recent blockade days. It seemed city dwellers were choked in fear and uncertainty. Vehicular movement was down drastically. Academic institutions, commercial establishments and even the kitchen markets witnessed an unusual calm.

Reena Amin, a street singer, has recently turned out to be the most endearing person to city dwellers for her parody songs, 'Aziz, tor lojja-shorom nai? jonogoner kotha akbar bhaiba dakha bhui. Aziz, tor mathay nai re chul, podotang na korley korbi boro bhooh' (O shameless Aziz! Don't you have a bit of shame? Think of the mass for once. You will regret it if you don't step down).

On the second day of the blockade, the worn out 'waste land' became alive. Tens of thousands of people gathered round the performers at Teigaon, Mohakhali, Mirpur 1 and 10, Gabtoli, Shyamoli, Shukrabad, Russell square, the High Court premises, Paltan, Uttara, Jatrabari and Kachpur. Spontaneous street children danced to the tunes of songs and got huge rounds of applause from the crowd.

In most cases, the singers sang on the CEC's removal, but at times songs of people's agony during the four-party alliance's five years tenure were also performed -- 'Jalajya bazarey

Whatever songs or dramas were staged against the CEC, election was after all in the minds of all rally goers, 'Khaleda Nizami desher bhalo chaya na', 'Khomotay ashe ebar Sheikh Hasina' (Khaleda-Nizami do not want people's welfare, Sheikh Hasina is the right one to run the country).

The most significant part of the ongoing movement is, it was non-violent. Songs on the liberation war and current politics at the street shows rejuvenated the city dwellers. Women's participation at these rallies was the sign of growing political awareness among women.

China ready

FROM PAGE 16

have long been clouded by the legacy of a 1962 border war and Beijing's economic and military support for India's rival and neighbour, Pakistan.

The improvement in Sino-Indian relations raised the possibility of an early settlement of a long-running boundary row that was a "strategic goal" of both countries, Hu added in New Delhi where he arrived late Monday.

The Chinese leader also welcomed the "improvement in relations between India and Pakistan" which have fought three wars, two over the disputed region of Kashmir.

Beijing was ready to play a "constructive role" for the promotion of peace in the region, Hu said, declaring "a peaceful and prosperous South Asia" was beneficial for both Asia and the world.

Hu added his talks Tuesday with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and other leaders in the Indian capital "had been fruitful".

His remarks came a day after the Chinese leader and Singh said they would speed up attempts to settle the frontier dispute, which triggered the border war.

New Delhi claims a large chunk of Chinese-administered territory in the disputed Kashmir while Beijing lays stake to Indian-administered Arunachal Pradesh.

The leaders also announced Tuesday plans to double trade to 40 billion dollars in the next three years between the world's two fastest-growing major economies.

"Our economies are complementary, we can form synergy... to improve international competitiveness."

India and China have been increasingly in competition in recent years, as they expand their global influence and scramble for energy and mineral resources globally to feed their booming economies.

The Chinese leader was slated to leave New Delhi later Wednesday to visit the Taj Mahal, India's famed monument to love, and then travel to Mumbai to attend an India-China economic summit Thursday, before heading to Islamabad.

Some Indian papers seized Tuesday on the protocol of Hu's arrival to stress the political relationship remained "businesslike".

The Hindustan Times noted Singh had in the past gone to the airport to greet US President George W. Bush, Saudi King Abdullah and Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, but this time Foreign Minister PrCanabh Mukherjee welcomed Hu.

Khaki-clad security forces were out in force across the capital, with a wide cord set up around the five-star hotel where the Chinese leader was staying to prevent Tibetan activists from disrupting the visit.

More than a dozen protesters were arrested Tuesday after they tried to storm meetings between Indian and Chinese leaders. But no arrests were reported Wednesday.

India recognises Tibet as being part of China but has given asylum to tens of thousands of Tibetans.

Aziz agrees

FROM PAGE 1

A meeting source said the president informed the council of advisers about the CEC's verbal consent to go on a leave at the very beginning of the meeting.

The information adviser could not specify when the leave will begin, as Aziz did not inform the president about his decision officially in writing yet. He however said the CEC might go on a leave anytime soon.

Asked, who will act as the CEC in absence of Aziz, Mahubul said the president will decide it in accordance with the laws.

Replying to a query, the information adviser said the president will address the nation on receiving a formal letter from the CEC. Meanwhile, an adviser on condition of anonymity, told The Daily Star last night that the president will deliver the address to the nation following a meeting with AL-led 14-party coalition.

When journalists asked the adviser whether the two new commissioners will be appointed on the basis of a consensus among electoral parties, he said, "There hasn't been a decision on that yet."

Adviser Dr Akbar Ali Khan however told reporters yesterday afternoon that the president and chief adviser assured them of appointing non-party persons to the EC who will be acceptable to all.

Following the presidential initiative to break the political deadlock on Monday, the day a presidential delegation met MA Aziz, the entire country was waiting with anticipation for news of a positive result, but CEC MA Aziz took three days to inform the president about his decision.

The anticipation for his resignation was mounting since yesterday morning as he refrained from attending office without initiating the process of taking a leave of absence. If Aziz had preferred to take a leave of absence, he would have to authorise an election commissioner to act as the CEC through holding a meeting of the EC.

Election Commissioner Justice Mahfuzur Rahman yesterday afternoon categorically said the EC did not hold such a meeting to discuss the issue. "In fact, I am not aware of it," he told reporters replying to a query on whether Aziz had authorised him to act as the acting CEC.

Officials of the EC Secretariat also expressed their ignorance about the reason for the sudden absence of Aziz from the office. "We don't know anything about the reason why he (Aziz) did not attend the office today," Mohammad Zakaria, in charge of additional secretary to the EC Secretariat, told reporters yesterday afternoon.

Before rushing to Bangabhaban yesterday noon, Secretary to the EC Secretariat Abdur Rashid Sarkar told reporters that he would brief the newsmen on his return from the president's office. But he did not return to the EC Secretariat.

The sudden absence of Aziz from the office also triggered speculations in the EC Secretariat about his next course of action.

One election commissioner however communicated with MA Aziz over the telephone, but he declined to say anything about their conversation.

Meanwhile, Election Commissioner Justice Mahfuzur Rahman said he did not have any communication with MA Aziz. "I cannot communicate with him to discuss the delicate matter of

whether he will take a leave of absence or resign."

CEC MA Aziz, who assumed the office on May 23 last year during the BNP-led alliance government's regime, has been mired in controversy regarding preparation of the voter list over the last 18 months.

Along with major political parties, different organisations of professionals and civil society personalities have also been demanding reconstitution of the EC for holding a free and fair election. In a recent development, foreign diplomats also started speaking against the Aziz-led EC saying the people have lost confidence in the present commission.

As a result, the council of advisers to the caretaker government from its first meeting on November 1 started searching for ways to make the EC credible, but they faced enormous difficulties as MA Aziz refused to resign, forcing the advisers to hold dialogues with political parties from November 13 to 15.

During the talks, most of the political parties strongly demanded reconstitution of the EC through removal of Aziz. Finally, the president decided to initiate the recent move on Monday night as 14-party resumed its country-wide indefinite blockade after a four-day break.

On Monday, the president sent a three-member delegation to persuade MA Aziz to take a leave of absence or to resign for resolving the political crisis.

Justice Sultan Hossain Khan and Justice AKM Sadeque, two former CECs, had resigned from the post in 1991 and 1996 respectively in the face of similar popular movements demanding their ouster.

Victory today

FROM PAGE 1

of the Election Commission is the demand of the people. The present EC cannot be a complete one without reconstitution, he said adding that the EC is yet to be reconstituted.

"The president's announcement is not enough for a free and fair election. So, we are reiterating our demand for reconstitution of the Election Commission," Jalil said, adding that the 14-party alliance's movements will continue.

Emerging from the Bangabhaban, Jalil told reporters that he asked the president/CA to the caretaker government to remove Election Commissioner SM Zakaria and other controversial commissioners from the Election Commission (EC) for the sake of a neutral election.

He also demanded that the president should appoint neutral persons to the EC. No controversial person will be acceptable, he told reporters after meeting President Iajuddin Ahmed at Bangabhaban.

Jalil, also the general secretary of Awami League, AL leader Asaduzzaman Noor and Vice Chairman of Bangladesh Bar Council Rokanuddin Mahmud met the president at 9:50pm. The meeting continued till 11:05pm.

Termining Chief Election Commissioner MA Aziz's going on leave as 'a victory of people', Jalil said "controversial" commissioner SM Zakaria and other officials are still there. "Such half-done step is not acceptable," he told reporters