

US military deaths in Iraq pass 9/11 toll

REUTERS, Baghdad

The deaths of six more American soldiers in Iraq pushed the US death toll to at least 2,978 — five more than the number killed in the September 11 attacks — as bombs killed more than 20 people in Baghdad on Tuesday.

At least 89 US soldiers have died so far this month, making it the deadliest this year after October's toll of 106, and adding pressure on President George W Bush to find a strategy to extricate 135,000 US troops from the messy war.

Tens of thousands of Iraqis have died since the invasion in 2003 to topple Saddam Hussein, which Bush said is an integral part of the "war on terror" following the Sept 11, 2001, attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.

US officials say 2,973 people were killed in those attacks, excluding the 19 hijackers.

The US military reported the six deaths on Tuesday.

Three soldiers taking part in a patrol looking for roadside bombs

were killed northwest of Baghdad on Tuesday, while two soldiers were killed in a roadside bomb attack southwest of Baghdad on Monday. A sixth was killed in another attack in the same area on Monday, the US military reported.

Stung by Republicans' defeats in congressional elections in which voter discontent over Iraq was a major issue, Bush has said he will announce a new strategy in January after listening to his military commanders and State Department officials.

More than three years after an invasion Bush said was to remove the threat that Saddam posed to America, Iraq is gripped by violence between majority Shia and once-dominant Sunnis.

Claims that Iraq had stocks of chemical and biological weapons were the main reason Bush cited for the war in Iraq but such weapons were never found. No links were established between Saddam and al Qaeda, blamed for the September 11 attacks.

2 'militants' get AL

FROM PAGE 1

The AL has finalised seat sharing with allies but it has bred discontent among many of the alliance leaders.

In the race for getting more seats than the other religion-based parties, Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish (BKM) recently signed a five-point Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil, and got nominations for four seats.

The MoU stipulates, among other things, that certified Alems (Islamic clerics) will have the right to issue fatwas (Islamic religious edicts) in the country if the grand electoral alliance comes to power through the upcoming election.

Keeping in view capture of power, the AL has nominated Maulana Habibur Rahman, founder principal of Kazir Bazar Madrassa in Sylhet, for Sylhet-6 constituency. He had visited the Afghan war front on invitation from Harkatul Jihad al-Islami of Pakistan in 1989.

To ensure 'militant's nomination, the AL had to sacrifice one of its learned leaders, Nurul Islam Nahid, who is education secretary of the party central committee.

It has also nominated Mufti Shahidul Islam, a veteran of the Afghan war, for Narail-2 constituency. Sheikh Hasina accused him of militant connection when he was a lawmaker during the BNP-led four-party coalition rule.

Two other islamist nominees are Mufti Habibur Rahman for Mymensingh-5 and Maulana Tafazzal Haque for Sunamganj-1 seats. Sources said although there have been no specific proofs about their militant links, both practise religion extremism.

The AL has nominated two more leaders of religion-based political parties—Islamic Front, Bangladesh and Zaker Party, they are Syed Bahadur Shah for Chandpur-5 seat and Mostafa Amir Faisal for Faridpur-4 seat.

AL sources said nomination of Bahadur Shah will be withdrawn, and finally former home minister major (ret'd) Rafiqul Islam will

replace him. Nomination of Rafiqul was finalised on Monday night.

Around 20 other nominations have also been given the same night from the AL high-command.

The Zaker Party chairman has become upset over getting 'only' one seat, and he made a phone call to Hasina yesterday. He told the AL chief that he would not participate in the election. AL sources said if Zaker Party does not contest, they would put up their candidate.

The AL has confirmed four seats for Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) although the JSD claims six. Sources said JSD president Hasanul Haque Inu was bargaining with AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil until last night for confirmation of two seats —Narsingdi-2 Zayadul Kabir and Brahmanbaria-2 ABM Firoz Ahmed.

The four confirmed seats are Kushtia-2 Hasanul Haque Inu, Chittagong-10 Maenuddin Khan Badal, Panchagarh-1 Nazmul Haque Pradhan and Bogra-4 Rezaul Karim Tansen.

The AL has confirmed two seats for the Workers' Party — Barisal-2 Rashed Khan Menon and Rajshahi-2 Fazle Hossain Badsha. The Workers party leaders were trying until last night to get two more seats — Satkhira-1 Advocate Mostafa Lutfulullah and Thakurgaon-3 Shahidullah Shaheed.

Ganatantri Party President Nurul Islam has been nominated for Noakhali-3. Moreover, the party submitted nominations from four other seats—Rangpur-3, Feni-1, Feni-2 and Narshindi-4, according to the party president.

Talking to The Daily Star AL Joint General Secretary Obaidul Quader said more than one nomination papers might have been submitted in several constituencies but keeping one, others will be withdrawn.

AL shoots itself in the foot

FROM PAGE 1

Our heads bowed in shame the tussle between Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina to get the man, who was singularly responsible for taking us down the unbridled corruption route, on their side. Earlier, in 2001 we had seen how the party formed by our war hero Ziaur Rahman, who had fought side by side with freedom fighters to liberate Bangladesh from the clutches of Pakistani occupiers and collaborators of Jamaat, embraces those very collaborators and take as partners in government. (Imagine if the war had gone the other way, wouldn't this very Jamaat have rejoiced to see Ziaur Rahman swing from the gallows on charge of "treason" against Pakistan?)

As if from a sense of having fallen behind in the game of deceit, chicanery and opportunism the party that led us during the Liberation War buried the central values of our independence struggle and signed a dangerous deal with the most conservative and extremist fringe of the so-called Islamic parties, which, in effect, lays the foundation for a future religious state. It is as if the Awami League has sold its soul for a few votes.

How could the AL agree, if elected to power, to "enact laws allowing certified Hakkani Alems to issue fatwas"? Why do we need a law declaring Prophet

Mohammad (pbh) as the ultimate and the greatest of prophets? To every Muslim he has been and will be the Greatest Prophet, no law can glorify him more, and no lack of law reduces an iota of the glory that Allah has bestowed upon him. Now that there is no such law, are we honouring our Prophet any less?

The real purpose here is not to respect the Prophet but to get a cover of legality to oppress people who are termed as different. The undeclared message here is that such a law will make it possible to declare the Ahmadias (a distinct group within the Muslims) as non-Muslims. Then there is a pledge to enact a law that will ban criticisms of

the Prophet and his disciples. Good Muslims never criticise the Prophet. But why should we ban any discussion about the activities of his disciples? This is nothing but a camouflaged attempt to enact a blasphemy law.

Then there is the pledge to implement the BNP-alliance government's decision to recognise the degrees awarded by the Qwami madrasas. To her credit Khaleda Zia resisted this pressure for the better part of her tenure and conceded to it at the very end much to the dismay of academics, educationists and modernists in general. The decision was neither well thought out, nor was it the product of any research as to its impact on education in general. The AL could have easily agreed to examine the proposal without pledging to implement something that nobody knows the impact of. This is a good example of how policy pledges are made without either any knowledge of their substance or assessment of their impact.

On Monday, on behalf of the 14-party alliance its coordinator and AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil issued a statement reiterating the alliance's commitment to secularism, uprooting anti-liberation forces, and upholding democracy. Interestingly, no mention was made in it about the deal signed earlier with the Khelafat-e-Majlish. Only the day before Mr. Jalil defended his deal, which he called a 'MOU' and not an agreement, on national TV saying that he had no objection to fatwas from qualified Alems. He even justified that position by saying that it will stop fatwas coming from unqualified and uneducated village mullahs.

Who are these 'qualified' Alems? What makes them 'qualified' to rise above the law of the land? Will this not bring into effect a parallel legal system alongside the existing one? Does our constitution permit a dual legal system? Power to enact fatwas gives these Alems power over our life, our family relations

and our property. Signing the deal as it stands (we published the full text in yesterday's paper) has basically laid the foundation of destruction of our constitution, our legal system and our way of life. In fact, it is a blue print for a different Bangladesh, not the one we have now and not the one for which millions died. It really amounts to destruction of modern Bangladesh created in 1971. (Has Mr Jalil considered the possibility that legalising fatwa will empower Mr. Amini to declare that no woman can be the prime minister of Bangladesh? What will happen to his "Nettri" then?)

If Awami League is serious about implementing the "MOU" after coming to power then it will have to effectively bury its ideological foundation and whatever little was left of its principles. If, on the other hand, the "MOU" is a ploy to hoodwink the so-called "Islamic vote bank", then the AL has sunk to the lowest ebb of political morality where it can say anything to anybody just to gain support prior to elections. This means that the party cannot be trusted. Whatever pledge it makes to the people will be like the "MOU" with the Khelafat, a time serving device to be discarded once in power. Is this Mr. Jalil's message in taking so much pain to distinguish between an 'agreement' and an 'MOU'?

The AL must really believe that we, the people, are a bunch of fools to be taken for a ride and hoodwinked at will. Well, people may have a surprise for such clever people. The deal shows that the party is so desperate and hungry to go to power that it can discard its founding principles, make pledges against what it proclaimed to stand for since its birth and embrace anybody as an ally, even people who really would prefer to see them destroyed.

The truth of the matter is that both the BNP and AL have, over the years, removed all moral underpinnings of their actions. There is no ethical anchor to their politics, and

as such, everything is a 'game' in their bid for power. This degeneration has not happened overnight and it has deteriorated over the last several decades starting from Ershad era. The tragedy is that the democratic governments did not stem the tide, they in fact added impetus to the process of decline of morality in politics.

There is a direct link with the rise of corruption in the country and the decline of ethics and moral values in our politics. The last regime of Khaleda Zia set newer records of corruption that put to shame what we saw during the Ershad era. The creation of "Hawa Bhaban" as the alternative source of power opened up the floodgate of corruption led by family members of the former prime minister.

We deliberately waited a couple of days before writing this commentary, hoping that the AL would realise the blunder of its action and retract. It has not yet done so, meaning that it was a well thought out action. Instead, it has issued an eyewitness statement insisting on standing for a secular Bangladesh built, we suppose, on the fatwas of the 'certified' Alems. This deal proves how desperate the AL leadership is for going to power. If such be the level of morality then we, the voters, have very little to expect from them.

Are we condemned to vote only to replace one corrupt, intellectually bankrupt and morally depraved group by another? The Awami League probably thinks that its vote bank is guaranteed. The secularists among them will grumble and protest but will vote for them at the end, the logic being they have nowhere else to go. So there is nothing to worry about. Well, if the view of a very small group of AL diehards is any indication, they may not have the heart to vote for the BNP but they will not vote for the AL. All of them said that they would cancel their votes in protest.

This is a reaction that the AL will be well-advised to take note of.

3 robbers killed in 'encounter' with Rab

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Three robbers were killed in an encounter with the members of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) on the Dhaka-Khulna highway at Chengutia under Ahoyanagar upazila of Jessore on Monday night.

Receiving information that a gang of six robbers was travelling in a Dhaka-bound Green Line Volvo Service from Khulna, a team of Rab-6 boarded the bus in the guise of passenger from Shibbari intersection.

When the robbers tried to overpower the driver of the bus at Chengutia at around 11:45pm, the Rab men swooped on them, leading to an encounter between the law enforcers and the robbers.

A Rab press release said during the encounter, three of the gang received bullet injuries and died on the spot while the rest managed to flee.

The dead are Rashid, Sumon and Bablu.

Six members of the elite force were also injured by bullets during the gunfight that continued for 15 minutes, the press release added.

One pipe gun, one air gun, three cartridges and a razor were recovered from the spot.

Warne fells

FROM PAGE 16

bowler to claim 700 wickets on the opening day of the fourth Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground Tuesday.

The master Australian leg-spinner bowled England opener Andrew Strauss with a leg-break with the second ball of his fourth over to trigger a huge roar from the near-capacity crowd.

Strauss had reached his first half-century of the series but was befuddled by the delivery, which knocked over his middle stump.

Warne, 37, is playing in his penultimate Test match after announcing last week that he was retiring from Test cricket after next week's fifth Sydney Test.

Warne is playing in his 144th Test match and has an average of 25.48 runs per wicket.

West Indian batting great Brian Lara, who had many batting duels with Warne, was in the 89,155 crowd to watch Warne create history.

Warne captured Lara's wicket seven times in Test cricket.

The Australian team surrounded Warne and individually congratulated him before captain Ricky Ponting gave him the ball to raise to the delighted hometown crowd in recognition of becoming the first bowler in Test history to pass 700 wickets.

Ershad's appeal rejected

FROM PAGE 1

chairman is sent to prison, the JP-Ershad will boycott the polls, he added.

The counsel for the state said Ershad is not eligible to contest the election after the yesterday's order. Some legal experts and Ershad's lawyers however opposed the view, saying that there is no bar for the ex-military ruler to contesting the polls.

On December 19, Ershad filed a petition seeking a stay on execution of the HC verdict that upheld the trial court's judgment, but cut the sentence from three years to two. The same day he filed a criminal miscellaneous petition (CMP) against the HC ruling.

The Divisional Special Sessions Judge's Court on July 6, 1995 sentenced him to three years in jail with a fine of Tk 10,000 in a graft charge regarding purchase of Japanese boats.

Explaining the implications of the SC order, Deputy Attorney General (DAG) Helaluddin Mollah said Ershad cannot contest the coming election.

On the other hand, the former dictator's counsel Sheikh Sirajul Huq said the order will not bar Ershad from contesting the elections.

Barrister Rafiqul Huq and Anisul Huq said he could still run for the election as his appeal petition [CMP] against the HC order has yet to be disposed of.

Ershad has decided to run from five constituencies as a candidate of the Awami League-led grand alliance.

Talking to the reporters at his residence yesterday, he expressed confidence that the SC ruling will not mean any bar for him to contesting the polls.

The DAG said Ershad will have to go to jail first and then submit the 'Vokaloitnama' approved by the jail authorities as well as the case documents if he is to file any appeal with the Appellate Division.

On July 6, 1995, the Divisional Special Sessions Judge's Court sentenced him to three years in jail with a fine of Tk 10,000 in a graft charge regarding purchase of Japanese boats.

The SC yesterday also turned down a state side petition for rejecting the previous SC order that granted the JP chairman permission to swear an affidavit for filing a leave-to-appeal against the HC verdict.

News agency UNB reports: The EC will seek opinion of the law ministry as to whether the SC order should bar ex-president HM Ershad from contesting the forthcoming general election, the first phase of preparation for which ended yesterday.

EC Secretary Abdul Rashid Sarkar said this when asked about the fate of Ershad in light of the apex court's order.

"I don't know about the verdict officially. We have to seek the opinion of the law ministry in this regard," said Sarkar.

The news agency also reports that the JP may boycott the next month's general election if its chairman is sent to prison in the Japanese boat purchase case.

"Our participation in the election will be uncertain...we may withdraw our candidatures on January 3 if our chairman is sent to jail as part of a political vendetta," Ruhul Amin Hawlader said.

He said, "Ershad has been victimised for the last 16 years with false cases filed against him. We

want justice and legal protection from the caretaker government," he added.

Referring to the SC order asking Ershad to surrender before the lower court, the JP secretary general said: "If he needs to surrender, he will do it after 30 days as per the law."

Meanwhile, sources at the Attorney General's Office said the certified copy of the HC December 14 judgment was sent to the trial court yesterday afternoon.

The Attorney General's Office too has received a copy of the judgment, DAG Helaluddin Mollah told the UNB.

500 killed

FROM PAGE 16

pipeline for fuel that they put into several tanker trucks, and the explosion occurred afterwards as local residents crowded in to take petrol for themselves.

"They came and tapped the pipeline, filled the tankers with the fuel and went away with them," witness Joe Okah said. "Then people here who were suffering came to fill jerrycans and then there was the explosion."

Police at the scene refused to give estimates of the number of dead and injured, but a senior Lagos State police officer earlier said that: "Maybe around 45 people were rushed to hospital and a number of people lost their lives."

Witnesses estimated at around 200 the number of charred bodies emerging as fire services dealt with the flames, while an oil industry source who asked not to be named told AFP: "Hundreds of people are said to have died in the raging fire."

The Nigerian Red Cross said the people who died or got burned were scooping fuel with the aim of selling it and officials estimated that the final toll could be very high.

A similar explosion in another part of Lagos in May killed about 200 people.

Pipeline vandalism and fuel theft are common in Nigeria, the world's eighth largest oil exporter where most people live in poverty.

Khaleda, Ershad

FROM PAGE 1

polls from two constituencies each. Khaleda will contest the polls from Dhaka-12, Comilla-8, Dinajpur-3, Barisal-5 and Bogra-6 while Hasina from Gopalganj-3, Narail-1, Khulna-1 and Rangpur-6. Ershad filed nomination papers for Dhaka-5, Sylhet-3, Habiganj-3, Rangpur-3 and Lalmonirhat-3.

Badruddoza yesterday filed nomination papers to compete with BNP's Shamsul Islam in Munshiganj-3 and Mizanur Rahman Sinha in Munshiganj-2 constituencies. Oli will contest from Chittagong-13 and 14.

LDP Secretary General Abdul Mannan filed nomination papers for three seats--Dhaka-10, Noakhali-4 and Laxmipur-4.

BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan will contest the polls from Narsingdi-1 in addition to his previous Narsingdi-3 constituency.

AL Organising Secretary Mohammad Nasim will contest the election from Sirajganj-1 and 2.

Nomination filing

FROM PAGE 1

filed nomination papers for 150 constituencies including the 31 allocated for them under the seat sharing agreement of the grand alliance.

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) claimed that it filed nominations for six constituencies as part of the grand alliance. Besides, some leaders of the party filed nomination papers for 14 other constituencies, just to either withdraw the candidatures or contest later, depending on finalisation of the nominations within the grand electoral alliance, the party said in a news release.

Leaders of BNP, the major partner of four-party alliance, filed nomination papers for almost all the constituencies.

Jamaat-e-Islami, another key ally of the BNP-led alliance, filed nominations for over 50 constituencies although the alliance allocated 31 seats for it.

Bangladesher Jatiya Party's leaders filed nomination papers for 15 constituencies although only two seats were allocated for it by four-party alliance.

Anwar Hossain Manju-led Jatiya Party's leaders filed nominations for 62 constituencies although BNP was reluctant to allocate more than two seats for them.

Apart from the major political parties united in the two alliances, some small political parties and independent candidates also filed their nomination papers.

Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal (BSD) said its leaders filed nominations for 45 constituencies.

Candidates across the country yesterday filed nominations with the offices of the ROs and AROs by depositing TK. 10,000 for each nomination.

The EC last night disclosed that a total of 4,146 nomination papers were filed in 300 constituencies.

At most places, the candidates went to the offices of RO's and ARO's in processions playing drums and bugles as a mark of festivity. The supporters, wearing party colours and carrying respective election symbols chanted slogans for their candidates.

However, the election fever was marred by violent clashes between rival political parties or intra-party groups at different places.

SHAMIM OSMAN FILES NOMINATION
Awami League (AL) leader and former lawmaker Shamim Osman submitted nomination paper for Narayanganj-4 constituency from AL-led 14-party combine yesterday returning from five years' self-exile.

Accused of criminal activities during the AL rule, Osman fled to India just after the 2001 election victory of BNP-led four-party alliance. He did not come back in the last five years fearing reprisals for his offences.

Besides, he is accused in a number of criminal cases including the explosion in AL office at Chashara in June 2001 that left 22 people killed.

Returning to Narayanganj, he addressed a rally yesterday at the Osmani stadium and begged pardon if he did anything 'wrong' during the AL era. Many people used his name while committing crimes, he claimed adding that only the Islamist militants and the anti-liberation forces tried to establish a 'godfather' image of him.

The AL leader also promised to nurture clean politics and ensure 'a drug and crime free' Narayanganj if elected this time.

Most of the central and district AL committee members did not participate in the rally.

Tsunami aims at Philippines after quake in Taiwan

AP, Taipei

A powerful earthquake struck off southwestern Taiwan yesterday, triggering a potentially destructive tsunami that was headed toward the Philippines on the second anniversary of the deadly waves that killed thousands in south Asia.

The quake, with a preliminary magnitude of between 6.7 and 7.2, was felt throughout Taiwan. It swayed buildings and knocked objects off the shelves in the capital, Taipei.

No damage or injuries were immediately reported.

Japan's Meteorological Bureau said a 3-foot-high tsunami was expected to hit Basco in the Philippines.

"There is a possibility of a destructive local tsunami," the bureau said. "However at some coasts, particularly those near the epicenter, higher tsunami may arrive."

The Hawaii-based Pacific Tsunami Warning Center said there was no threat of a destructive Pacific-wide tsunami, based on historical earthquake and tsunami data, but that they would not know for about an hour what the threat might be to Taiwan or the Philippines.

Taiwan's Central Weather

Bureau said the quake measured magnitude 6.7; the US Geological Survey estimated it at 7.1; and the Japanese bureau put it at magnitude 7.2.

Temblors of magnitude 7 or higher are generally classified as major earthquakes, capable of widespread, heavy damage.

The Central Weather Bureau said a 6.4 magnitude aftershock struck a nearby area about nine minutes later.

The initial tremor was centered at sea about 13 miles southwest of Hengchun on the southern tip of Taiwan, the bureau said. Hengchun is about 260 miles south of Taipei.

A magnitude 9.1-magnitude earthquake off the coast of Indonesia on Dec. 26, 2004 caused a tsunami that killed at least 230,000 people in 11 countries. Those waves reached as high as 33 feet.

Unlike wind-driven surface waves, tsunamis are caused by seismic activity such as undersea earthquakes, landslides or volcanoes.

That means tsunamis are deep, reaching all the way to the seafloor, so that when they reach land they are forced upward into sometimes towering walls of water that can inundate coastal communities.

Over 300 injured

FROM PAGE 1

During the clash, a number of vehicles including a car owned by a private television channel and a motorbike of a photojournalist were set on fire.

However, both Khoka and Selim filed their nomination papers and the situation became calm after they left the area around 2:00pm.

Meanwhile, supporters of BNP leader Nabi Ullah blockaded the Dhaka-Chittagong highway at Sanir Akhra in the capital for three hours from 2:00pm after the BNP leader failed to get the party ticket.

The Nabi Ullah supporters ransacked several vehicles and torched two vehicles on the highway. They also declared BNP leader Salah Uddin, who received the party ticket for Dhaka-4 constituency, "unwanted" in the locality.

In Natore, BNP men attacked an AL procession in the town yesterday noon leaving at least 30 injured, eight of them were hit by bullets.

The bullet-hit AL leaders Gaffar, Anwar, Karim, Rahim, Arzu, Aman Ali, Saiful Islam and Hazrat Sardar were admitted to Natore Sadar Hospital.

Witnesses said AL leader Hanif Ali Sheikh, leading a procession of his supporters, was going to file his nomination papers around 12:30pm. The procession came under attack at Kalurmore.

Police rushed to the spot and dispersed the feuding groups. Police recovered a shotgun with one bullet from the spot but none was arrested.

The AL has called for a daylong hartal in Natore today protesting the attack.

In Narsingdi, angry supporters of former BNP lawmaker Khairul Kabir Khokon vandalised several vehicles and blockaded the Dhaka-Sylhet highway over BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan submitting nomination papers for Narsingdi-1 constituency, which Khokon was elected from in the previous parliament.

In Chandpur, supporters of an AL candidate locked in a clash with the supporters of Islamic Front Bangladesh, a party which is contesting the polls under the AL's platform.

Dipu Moni, AL candidate for Chandpur-3 constituency, and her supporters were attacked by activists of a rebel candidate Ahsanul Karim Swapan. The incident left around 10-12 people injured and two cars vandalised.

In Chudangsa, at least 80 activists of two rival groups of BNP were injured over filing of the nomination papers at Damurhuda in Chudangsa yesterday.

Around 60 vehicles were also damaged during the clash between supporters of BNP District President Mozammel Haque and Damurhuda Municipality Vice-president Aktarul Islam.

Processions of the rival groups came face to face on the street triggering the clash.