

Another Karen base falls as Myanmar intensifies attack

BANGKOK, Mar 21: Myanmar Government forces blasted volleys of mortar and artillery fire from hilltops Saturday to support infantry advancing on Karen guerrilla headquarters at Manerplaw, Thai sources at the border said, reports Reuters.

A Karen base further south fell to the government early Saturday morning, with 20 guerrillas killed and 30 wounded, Karen sources said.

About 2,000 soldiers were fighting their way eastwards to Manerplaw, on the banks of the border river Moel about 12 km (eight miles) from Sleeping Dog Mountain which the Karen lost last week, Thai Army officers told Reuters by telephone.

The infantry moved down from the mountains Friday and moved about three kilometres (nearly two miles) towards the Salwee river, said one officer monitoring the movement.

The Government troops controlled all the surrounding hills and had set up mortar and artillery bases on them, he said.

In a separate action Government troops overran the Karen outpost at Norta Saturday after launching an assault backed by artillery on Friday. Karen fighters were fleeing north to Manerplaw.

The Manerplaw stronghold of the Karen, an ethnic and Christian minority in Buddhist Myanmar, has been under siege since the Government launched its operation Dragon King in late December.

Despite their losses, the Karen leaders are confident that difficult terrain and the upcoming monsoons will ensure their survival. Manerplaw also serves as a base for dissident politicians and students who fled repression by the military government in Yangon.

Government Radio has said 155 Karen and 19 soldiers were killed in the battle for Sleeping Dog Mountain. Two smaller bases were captured on Wednesday with 33 Karen and one Government soldier killed, it says.

A Thai source said he expected the Myanmar people to seek a more convenient route to Manerplaw by crossing the border into Thailand at Ban Sobmoet while pressing on from the west.

Thai troops have been deployed in Sobmoet villages to push back any crossing. Helicopters were standing by to airlift reinforcements if necessary, he said.

"Mortar bases have already been established on our border to prevent Myanmar intruders. We have received orders to fire back immediately. We cannot tolerate any more violations of sovereignty," said an officer.

Thai troops who cleared the area after driving out Myanmar intruders this week from Thai Doe Seang in Mae Hong Son province found the bodies of 15 soldiers and many weapons, including mortars and recoilless rifles, a Border Patrol Police source said.

About 30 Myanmar soldiers were killed in Mae Hong Son and dozens in Mae Sot and Wang Kaew villages in clashes with Thai forces after about 300 Myanmar troops crossed the border last week, Thai sources said.



Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia met with UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali at the UN headquarters in New York Friday. —PID photo

The Midnight File

Sikh militants kill 20 more in Punjab

CHANDIGRAH, Mar 21: Fifteen persons were gunned down and about 20 others wounded when militants opened indiscriminate firing at Mandi Ahmedgarh in Sangrur district of Punjab this evening, police said here.

Twenty seven persons, including seven top militants and eleven other militants, were killed in other parts of the state since last night, reports PTI.

50 arrested as MQM leader assassinated

KARACHI, Mar 21: At least 50 people have been arrested following the assassination of a leader of the ethnic Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) here, police said today. Shahzad Mirza, a labour leader from the MQM, which represents Urdu-speaking settlers and is a partner in the ruling coalition, was shot dead by two men as he came out from a Mosque after Friday prayers, officials said, reports AFP.

Politics in places of worship 5-party may ask govt to impose ban

The left-leaning Five Party combine is planning to demand of the government to make a specific law prohibiting political activities in the religious institutions.

The alliance leaders according to sources, will soon meet the State Minister for Religious Affairs to hand over a memorandum urging him to take necessary steps.

Apart from this, the Five Party will move a bill in the next session of Parliament seeking a ban on political activities in the religious institutions of the country. Rashed Khan Menon MP, told The Daily Star last night.

Meanwhile, a team of the Five Party leaders yesterday visited different religious institutions in the city including Baitul Mukarram Mosque, Dhakeshari Temple, Christian church at Kakrail and Buddhist Monastery at Kamalapur and handed over separate memorandums to the respective chief of the institutions requesting them to abstain from involving themselves in the political activities and allow others to conduct political activities inside the religious institutions.

Khalequzzaman, a Five Party leader and Convenor of Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal (BSD), told this correspondent last night that the chiefs of Dhakeshari Mandir, Mugh Bazar Church and Kamalapur Pagoda expressed solidarity with the Five Party idea relating to the danger of allowing the political parties to conduct their activities inside religious institutions.

They supported our plan for putting pressure on the government for making specific law banning political activities in places of worship, Khalequzzaman told The Daily Star.

But the Khatib of Baitul Mukarram Mosque, Moulana Obaidul Hoque, although informed earlier, was absent from the Mosque at 1.45 pm when the Five Party delegation went to visit him for handing

over the memorandum, sources said.

A government servant, Khatib Moulana Obaidul Hoque addressed a public rally on Friday condemning the public trial of Jamaat chief Golam Azam, a foreign citizen and collaborator of the Pakistani occupation forces during the country's War of Independence in 1971.

The delegation handed the memorandum over to an Imam of the mosque in absence of its Khatib.

They, however, met the Islamic Foundation authorities and lodged a verbal complaint against the Khatib for his public comments defending the war criminal Golam Azam.

BSD leader Khalequzzaman informed this correspondent that a section of Islamic Foundation officials, while talking to the Five Party delegation, also expressed their dissatisfaction over the Moulana's direct involvement with the Jamaat referring to the Friday's rally.

Meanwhile, three left-leaning political alliances — Five Party combine, Patriotic Democratic Front (PDF), and Ganotantrik Biplobi Jote — met yesterday evening to discuss the Golam Azam issue at the Topkhana office of National Awami Party (NAP).

The joint meeting called upon the people to make the public trial of Golam Azam on March 26 a success.

ATP case Ershad, three others face trial Apr 16

Special Judge Qamrul Islam Siddiqui yesterday brought charges against former President H M Ershad and three others, including two of his ministers, of abusing power and illegally obtaining financial benefits amounting to Tk 20,18,08,260 in the ATP (Advanced Turbo Prop) aircraft purchase deal, reports BSS.

They have been charged with abusing their official position as public servants to obtain for themselves or for any person pecuniary advantage to the extent of Tk 20,18,08,260 by illegal or corrupt means.

The deal was made in 1989 to purchase three ATP aircraft from British Aerospace Company for Biman Bangladesh Airlines, reports BSS.

The judge said the accused, former ministers Ziauddin Ahmed and Lt Col (Retd) H M A Gaffar and former industries Secretary A K M Mosharraf Hossain, have committed in their actions an offence punishable under Section 5(2) of the Prevention of Corruption Act of 1947.

All the accused, including Ershad, pleaded not guilty after the judge finished reading out the charges. The former President's attorney, Khandakar Mahub Hossain, and Ershad himself, however, pointed out that there were wrong quotes in the argument of the prosecution, which were reflected in the charges.

Attorney General Aminul Haq said that if there was any mistake it would go in favour of the defence.

Judge Siddiqui said that factual mistakes, if there were any, would be corrected.

Ziauddin Ahmed also complained of incorrect information in the prosecution's charges and asked the chairman (judge) to rectify those in the interest of justice. He also pointed out that the manufacturers never quoted any price as it has been charged.

The judge fixed April 16 for the trial to start in which 24 prosecution witnesses are likely to be examined.

It was said in the formal charge that before finalisation of the decision by Biman's board of directors on the procurement of the ATP aircraft and finalisation of their prices, the former President, accompanied by Mosharraf Hossain, visited the factory of British Aerospace, the manufacturer of the aeroplanes, and publicly praised their performances.

It was further charged that despite the then Finance Secretary's request in a letter to President Ershad objecting to the purchase of the ATPs considering Biman's weak financial position and overall situation, the former Minister for Civil Aviation, Lt Col (Retd) Gaffar, approved the purchase deal with dishonest intention.

Ziauddin Ahmed, as a state minister in charge of civil aviation, did not stop the deal although there were negative reports from Biman's economic and technical evaluation team on the procurement of the ATP aircraft.

After the date for trial was fixed, Khandakar Mahub Hossain made a verbal prayer that he be allowed to consult with his client, Ershad, once a week.

The Attorney General assured Ershad's attorney of making such arrangements and said, "We are preparing to provide all facilities."

Feeder vessel delayed in Mongla Port

From Staff Correspondent

KHULNA, Mar 21: A joint meeting of four organisations related with Mongla Port today demanded legal action against the persons involved in delaying the sailing of the container feeder vessel, MV Fongsong.

The meeting said that the delay would affect the goodwill of the vessel with its mother vessel in Singapore and even it may fail to feed the mother vessel due to the delay.

The delay also incurred a damage of \$ 10,000, it informed. The organisations at the meeting were Mongla Port Users Coordination Committee, Bangladesh Stevedores Association, Clearing and Forwarding Agents Association and Bangladesh Steamer Agents Association.

Port sources said that the container vessel came to the port on March 17. It completed its loading of exportable jute, jute-goods, and frozen food worth Taka three crore by March 19 and was ready to feed the mother vessel in Singapore for further transportation to Japan, UK and some other countries.

But the sailing of the vessel was delayed by 36 hours in the name of setting the shore cranes in safe position, the sources mentioned.

When contacted, the Chairman of the Mongla Port told The Daily Star that a probe body was formed on the matter. The body would submit its report soon and legal action would be taken against the persons involved, he added.

Khatib

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It added.

The signatories to the statement included Maulana Ishaq, Maulana Sobhan, Golam Kibria, Maulana Shah Oluallah, Maulana Abdul Gani, Maulana Abu Taher and Maulana Zahurul Alam.

Meanwhile, the convenor of Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal Khalequzzaman Bhuiyan in a statement said that the advocacy of the Khatib of the Baitul Mukarram Mosque in favour of Golam Azam had stunned the nation. He said that the statement of the Khatib had unveiled his connection with the Jamaat-e-Islami and also the Jamaat's strategy to politicise the mosques.

The BSD leader demanded that the government remove Maulana Obaidul Huq saying that such a controversial religious leader could not be accepted by the common people.

A statement of the Ganatantrik Chhatra Oikya (GCO) condemned the Baitul Mukarram Mosque Khatib for his threats to the people organising the public trial of Golam Azam and also his addressing a political gathering.

The statement said that the people had long been raising voice against politics in the religious institutions and that the Khatib, being a government official, had taken part in politics.

Ganatantrik Party chief Ahmadul Kabir and General Secretary Mohammad Afzal in a joint statement condemned the "Provocative statements" of the Khatib of the Baitul Mukarram Mosque and demanded his removal to maintain the sanctity of the national mosque.

The leaders also demanded ban on politics in religious institutions including mosques, temples and churches.

The Secretary General of the Youth Council Abdul Malek Ratan Saturday denounced the statements of the Khatib and demanded his ouster.

9 killed, 53 injured in road mishaps

By Staff Correspondent

Nine persons were killed and 53 others injured in six separate road accidents in three districts.

Our Pabna correspondent reports: Four persons were killed and 35 others injured in three separate road mishaps in the district Saturday.

Two persons were killed on the spot and 25 others injured when a passenger bus (Rangpur Ba-2086) turned turtle and fell into a road side ditch at Dubulia, 8 km from here. The bus was moving towards Sujanagar.

The victims were identified as Abdur Rashid (35) and Wahid Ali (50). Both hailed from Sadar upazila.

Among the injured 22 were admitted to the Sadar hospital.

In another incident, Abdul Jalil was killed and 10 others were injured when a Bogra bound bus skidded off the road at Kashinathpur, 30 km from here.

Of the injured, 8 were admitted to Bera upazila Health Complex.

Another unidentified young girl (14) reportedly mad, was crushed to death by a speeding truck at Defunia on Pabna — Ishwardi highway on Saturday. The truck, however, managed to escape.

Our Bogra correspondent adds: Three persons were killed and eighteen others injured in two separate accidents in Bogra.

One person was killed and fifteen others injured in a bus accident on Dhaka-Bogra highway Thursday morning.

The accident occurred when the bus (Dhaka Metro Bha-5150), which was going to Dhaka from Naogon, fell into a roadside ditch as the driver lost control of the vehicle.

The dead could not be identified and the seriously injured passengers were admitted to the Md Ali Hospital, Bogra. Of them, the condition of three — Saiful (25), Ashrafunnessa (30) and Moni (40) — was critical.

In another accident on Friday, two persons were killed and three others injured when a truck (Dhaka Metro Na-7969) fell into a roadside ditch 16 kilometres from here.

The driver and helper died on the spot and Bellal (25), Ismail (30) and Nurul Islam (40), who were injured in the accident, were admitted to the Md Ali Hospital, Bogra.

Our Rajbari correspondent says, at least two persons were killed as a passenger-bus and a truck collided head on near Haral Bridge on Baliakandi-Rajbari road at about 12:30 pm Saturday.

Of the victims, one was identified as Khabiruddin, 27, while the other, a 40 year-old man, could not be identified. Both of the passengers died on the spot.



Members of the Dhaka Bar took to the streets in city yesterday expressing solidarity with the March 26 public trial of Golam Azam. —Star photo

Refugees' health

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very visible on his face.

He kept silent, but other refugees made him understand that this reporter meant no harm and only wanted to help him.

Asked after being offered a chocolate why he was so scared, he replied: "We were told the other boys were killed after failing to carry heavy sacks."

Rahman had skin infections and fever, which doctors said were respectively from malnutrition and cold.

Of the 12,006 refugees in Kutu Palong Camp, 5,295 were children, while in this camp of 20,000, more than 8,000 were up to five years of age. The rest were children above five and adults.

Officials said the average in 10 camps showed that the children formed the majority and that two per cent of the women were pregnant, and since January 187 babies were born there.

M Abdul Huque, the officer heading this camp said the refugees had no knowledge of family planning and some had several wives.

"Making children is their only entertainment," he added.

UNHCR, Bangladesh Red Crescent and Bangladeshi officials said they had no separate plan for psychologically treat-

ing children, but Medics Sans Frontieres (MSF, or Doctors Without Borders) were working on malnutrition cases.

MSF's paramedic, Catherine Lefebvre, said their programme was moderate considering the large number of children and that 70 per cent suffered from severe malnutrition.

Eight-year-old Halima Khatun was also typically suffering from fear.

She said pointing to two Ansar militia watching: "Uniforms scare me...they look like Myanmar soldiers."

Doctors and relief workers said they urgently needed anti-measles and pox vaccinations along with those to treat diarrhoea as well as dysentery.

"Unless emergency medicines to treat them reach us soon it will be a serious situation as the number of doctors were too small to deal with the current situation, and if health conditions deteriorate fast with rains we do not know what will happen," he said, requesting anonymity.

G Rahman Shajahan, a doctor with the private Ganashasthya Kendra said, "Child health condition was very serious, besides fear due to experiences at home they are also scared with fast moving vehicles, which is a new experience for them."

(Nadeem Qadir is a guest writer in The Daily Star)

Forests

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up camps for more than 1,80,000 refugees who have fled Myanmar since March last year.

They said, nursery worth taka 60 thousand have also been destroyed because of the refugees.

According to the officials, there is about one lakh acres of forest land in the Cox's Bazar forest division at present. They said even if the number of refugees remain at the current level, forests in about four thousand acres of land would be destroyed in the next one year.

"We don't have enough staff to guard the forests against pilferage and destruction," said Amjad Hossain Sarkar, the Divisional Forest Officer. He said that there are only 193 guards to look after the forests, but many of them have already been enlisted to work in the refugee camps.

Abdullah Al Noman, the Forest and Environment Minister, who arrived here today, will review the situation with local officials. He will visit the areas tomorrow.

World Bank

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for a wide variety of decisions, leading to delay in project implementation.

These bureaucratic tangles, observes the World Bank, will make "very difficult in practice delegating authority to the executing agencies even though this is probably the most important factor for improving their performance in the long run."

Alongside bureaucratic tangles, ambiguity and complexity in project processing have, over the years, been pointed out by donors as deterrents to aid utilisation in the country.

The WB report has suggested that the Government concentrate its efforts on achieving "greater clarity and simplicity" in the guidelines.

World Bank, which heads the Aid Consortium for Bangladesh, has recently warned, henceforth, aid would be strictly tied to improved performance in utilisation.

According to the Bank's latest estimates, total aid disbursement in the current fiscal year will drop to 1.69 billion US dollar from 1.73 billion last year.

Russia assures help to resolve Rohingya issue

The Russian Federation has assured Bangladesh of its all possible help in resolving the Myanmar refugee problems, reports UNB.

Diplomatic sources here said Saturday the assurance came when Bangladesh Ambassador to the federation Mostafiz Rahman met with Ramishvili, a senior Foreign Ministry official of the federation, at his office recently.

Mostafiz briefed him on the latest situation regarding flow of refugee from Myanmar to Bangladesh and Bangladesh's move to raise the issue in the UN Security Council.

Tk 106 crore Norwegian grant

Norway will give 200 million Norwegian Kroner (equivalent to 106 crore taka) as grant to Bangladesh under the bilateral economic assistance programme, reports UNB.

An agreement to this effect was signed in Dhaka Saturday

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