

Release of hostages Foreign envoys hail PM's initiative

UNB, Agencies

Prayers over, different organisations and people of different strata placed wreaths at the mazar. Among them were leaders of Awami League, its front organisations, central leaders and local administration officials and people.

The President later visited the mazar and mausoleum premises and signed the visitor's book with compliments to the independence leader.

"Uncompromising leadership of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is a glorious chapter in the contemporary history of attaining independence," Justice Shahabuddin wrote in the visitor's book.

Meanwhile, different political parties and socio-cultural organisations chalked out separate programmes.

The leaders of the party led by the Chief Whip Abul Hasanat Abdullah placed wreath at the portrait of father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the morning. A *milad mahfil* was also held. Besides, a discussion was held at the South Bank of the Bibir Pukur area.

Bangabandhu Sangskritik Jote observed a daylong programme on this day at Aswini Kumar Town Hall. The programme included placing of wreaths at the portrait of Bangabandhu, distribution of sweets, *milad mahfil*, discussion on the life of Bangabandhu and cultural function.

Kheyali Group Theatre organised a discussion and cultural function at its office premises. Children's organisation Shuktara, Khelaghar Asar and Divisional Information Office jointly organised similar programmes at AM Government Primary School.

The district unit of Shishu Academy organised a two-day programme on this occasion. The programme included discussion and children's painting competition.

Freed hostages kept away

Hospital, said the three foreigners received a clean bill of health.

"They are in reasonably good physical state and it seems they did not undergo any physical torture. However, a sense of trauma cannot be ruled out as they were in captivity for 28 days. They need complete rest immediately," said a hospital official.

Diplomats of the two countries and several senior military officers occupied the cabins adjacent to those where the released hostages were lodged. It was learnt that they were engaged in talks. Army supplied food to the freed hostages.

At 8:50 pm, a spokesman of the British High Commission said over phone from the CMH, "We are ready to leave. But we do not know when we can leave the place (CMH)".

Meanwhile, at 9 pm, official news agency BSS gave a flash that Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad would address a press conference at 10 pm at state guest house Padma (Saturday night) regarding the release of the three hostages.

Since the afternoon, senior army officials were seen visiting the CMH. They were learnt to be "debriefing" the three Europeans.

Stand-by support troops were seen arriving at the CMH and even

Five killed, 12 hurt in Kabul car blast

AFP, Kabul

Five people, including two children were killed and a dozen others wounded when a powerful car bomb rocked Kabul yesterday, officials and witnesses said.

The Taliban's official Radio Shariat said five people were killed when opposition forces carried out the explosion at the "best of their foreign masters." Three Taliban soldiers were among those injured, according to the broadcast.

Three cars caught fire and several houses were badly damaged in the blast in the city's western section of Karte Parwan area.

Four people with serious injuries were admitted to the main Wazir Akbar Khan hospital.

The two boys died instantly, said one resident as he fixed his gate, shattered by the force of the blast.

"One died in my arms and the other in the hands of his mother. There were many people wounded lying around," he told AFP, pointing at pools of blood close to two destroyed Taliban military jeeps and a charred taxi cab.

Abdul Nafe, deputy police commander in the area, said the bomb had been planted in a taxi which was blown to pieces, damaging nearby houses and wounding passersby.

Taliban soldiers cordoned off the site and started searching vehicles.

15 RDA employees

The accused persons include RDA Estate Officer Abu Bakar Siddique, Accounts Officer Shahidul Islam and Assistant Engineer Ali Hossain Masud.

In his petition, the complainant alleged that RDA men had forcibly occupied the Padma residential park area and looted its trees.

Meanwhile, the court asked the police to take necessary measures in this regard.

Hostages freed unharmed

troops became sure about presence of the kidnappers at Chakma and Marma villages of Nakhshchhari and Daijijyapara in the remote inaccessible hill forest, six km north of Kashkhali.

"We surprised the kidnappers at midnight. The gang numbering about seven fired back when we opened some blank shots. As they felt that they were being encircled, they gave up and fled after the exchange of fire for about 12 minutes. A thorough search in the area resulted in rescue of the three hostages," a beaming officer told The Daily Star at Kashkhali camp.

Parliament Member from Rangmati Dipankar Talukder, GOC of 24 Division Major General Abdul Matin, Divisional Commissioner of Chittagong Mobaidul Islam, Brigade Commander of 305th Brigade of Rangamati zone Brigadier General Golam Rabbani and Lt Col Ashraf were present at the camp. Besides, representatives from British High Commission Graham Cough, Chris Suite, John Crawford from Scotland Yard, Danish police specialist Mogul Wilber, Sore J NYSE, head of Danish construction firm Campasax for which the three work, and PCJSS leader Shaktiman Chakma were present to hug and cheer the freed hostages.

It was a joyous and cheerful moment for officials and troops and a crowd, kept at a distance, to watch the freed Europeans agog with smiles. They had grown beard and looked tanned.

Army doctor Lt Col Bahar took care of the three who underwent a thorough check-up at the medical hut of the camp and pronounced them fit to travel to Dhaka.

Their departure for the capital was delayed for some time as helicopter was not immediately available. One had to be requisitioned from Tungipara where Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, ministers and other dignitaries had gone to offer prayers at the mazar of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on his 81st birthday on Saturday.

Mobaidul Islam, who briefed newsmen every evening at Rangamati Circuit House for the past one month, had his last briefing at the entrance of the army camp.

The official who indicated on Friday that freedom for the hostages was imminent said with a smile there had been no deal and no ransom was paid to the abductors.

The army personnel had been keeping an eye on the kidnappers and during the raid found the hostages together in a hut. The miscreants had fled, leaving some assorted weapons -- a handgun and several country-made guns, he said

without giving details.

"It is a moment of pride for the nation and the army feel happy to carry out the task of freeing the hostages," a beaming Colonel Ashraf said.

"I has been a difficult assignment for his soldiers. For 30 days, they had to be on guard day and night in the forests and hills, closing in the cordon that the kidnappers eventually found difficult to break," said another officer.

He indicated that troops, forbidden to launch a full scale operation, had to use their wits and knowledge of the areas from decades of counter-insurgency operation. "After pinpointing the hideout of the kidnappers, we could surprise them," he said preferring anonymity.

As the hostages flew towards Dhaka 11:10 am in an air force helicopter, Divina Mikkelsen, wife of Torben Mikkelsen, was going to Kutukchhari by road to attend a public rally tomorrow for freedom of the hostages.

"I am overwhelmed with joy", Divina later told newsmen at Rangamati Circuit House where she had a brief rest before returning to Dhaka. She thanked all helping rescue of her husband.

The hostage drama finally ended but it left many questions unanswered.

"We did not have any prisoner,"

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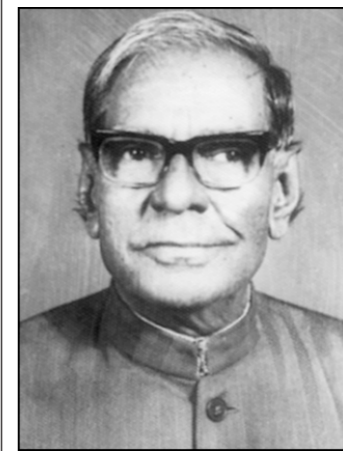
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Abul Mansur's 22nd death anniversary today



The 22nd death anniversary of Abul Mansur Ahmad, renowned litterateur, journalist and statesman of the sub-continent will be observed today with due solemnity, says a press release.

The mark the occasion, Abul Mansur Ahmad Memorial Committee has organised *Doa Mahfil* at Dhaka and Mymensingh.

Late Abul Mansur Ahmad, besides being one of the greatest satirist of Bengali literature, was also renowned politician, lawyer and a very powerful journalist. He was the editor of Daily Krishak, Nabajug and Ittehad in undivided Bengal and was a pioneer in progressive journalism. Abul Mansur Ahmad was also a very successful politician. He was provincial Education Minister in the United Front Cabinet under Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Huq and was the central Commerce and Industries Minister of the Awami League govt of Prime Minister Shaheed Suhrawardy. He was known for his toughness in matters of interest of East Bengal.

His five and a half hour long speech in the Pakistan Parliament was termed as the most daring speech of the time made on the floor of the Parliament. In this speech he claimed that Pakistan comprised of two nations, East Bengalees with their distinct culture are different from rest of Pakistanis and they formed a separate nation. This

speech outraged West Pakistan and his execution by a firing squad was demanded by the Karachi Morning News through an editorial 'This is Sedition'.

Late Abul Mansur Ahmad's publications include great satires like *Aina*, *Asmani Purdah*, *Gulliver Safar Nama* and *Food Conference*. He has left behind great social and political history of Bengal titled. He has two auto biographical writings on political and other *Amar Dekha Rajinoti Panchash Bachar (50 years of politics as I have seen it)* aspects of his life. He was proficient in writing in both English and Bangla. His political discourse in the context of Pakistan under the name and title of 'End of a Betrayal and Fulfillment of Lahore Resolution' in English was highly praised at home and abroad.

Late Abul Mansur Ahmad always propagated secularism with respect for religion in a manner unparalleled in the forties, fifties and the sixties. His contribution towards opposition movement in the early days of Pakistan, was extremely significant. He wrote about the language issue from early forties, and contributed to the language movement as editor of Ittehad. He was the main architect of 21-point programme Election Manifesto of Jukta Front (a grand coalition of the three giants of our politics Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Huq, Maulana Bhashani and Shaheed Suhrawardy) in 1954 election through which Muslim League was ousted from power. The 21-point programme (Ekush Dafa) was the first comprehensive articulation of the political, economic and cultural demands of the Bengalis of the then eastern part of Pakistan.

Bangla Academy has recently published two volumes of Abul Mansur's collected works. Three more volumes are under print. Abul Mansur Ahmad was one of the greatest political personalities of Bangladesh who combined rare talents in three distinct fields politics, journalism and literary writing.

EU to monitor polls

1996, the EU fielded 29 observers, Menezes said, adding that the EU has now been able to develop an effective election-monitoring mechanism acquiring expertise after working in different national elections across the world.

He referred to the signing of Cooperation Agreement between Bangladesh and the European Union incorporating political cooperation and functioning of democratic institutions as one of the key elements.

Road accidents

Chittagong bound truck collided head on with a microbus coming from Laxmipur, leaving seven passengers of the microbus dead on the spot and four others injured.

The injured including the microbus driver, were taken to Chandina Upazila Health Complex when one of them, succumbed to injuries.

Of the dead, seven were identified as Bakul Begum, 38, Ibrahim, 15, Sirajul Islam, 70, Shaon, 4, Mohammad Ali, 40, Moina, 45, and Mahin 2.

The identity of another victim could not be known.

Police seized both the vehicles, but the driver and helper of the truck fled the scene soon after the accident. A case was filed with Chandina thana in this connection.



Divisional Commissioner Mobaidul Islam talking with the three foreign hostages who were rescued earlier in the day at Rangamati.

Cong likely to shift strategy towards coalition politics

AFP, Bangalore

India's main opposition Congress party signalled yesterday a major strategy shift towards coalition politics, during a national meeting dominated by the bribery scandal rocking the government.

The mood at the two-day All India Congress Committee (AICC) meet in Bangalore was jubilant, with the party sensing its first real opportunity to seize the initiative from the government since it came to power 17 months ago.

Congress president Sonia Gandhi devoted most of her inaugural address to a vitriolic attack on Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's coalition, saying it had lost the moral authority to govern and should resign.

The government has been plunged into its worst crisis to date over allegations of corruption contained in a video expose by undercover journalists posing as arms dealers.

The video footage showed senior politicians, bureaucrats and army officials apparently taking bribes to facilitate a fictional deal to sell equipment to the Indian military.

"The prime minister is busy defending his allies and the guilty,

They have cheated the nation. What he is doing now is nothing but a betrayal of the nation and treachery," Gandhi told thousands of party workers.

With cracks appearing in Vajpayee's unwieldy ruling alliance, a resolution to be adopted at the AICC contained a key clause signalling the willingness of Congress which has always shunned coalition government to seek a power-sharing arrangement with other

parties.

"Taking into account the present political scenario, (Congress) would be prepared to enter into appropriate electoral or coalition arrangements with secular parties on the basis of mutual understanding," the resolution said.

Senior party leader Arjun Singh, moving the resolution, said the time was ripe for Congress to give the clarion call to its workers to "confront and agitate" against the ruling coalition's attempt to cling to power.

"It is projected as if Congress is against all coalitions. We are prepared to enter into appropriate coalition arrangements with secular parties," Singh said.

When the last Vajpayee government collapsed in 1999, Gandhi scorned the prospect of a coalition and instead sought to set up an alternative Congress administration with the outside support of other parties.

The move failed, with not enough regional parties willing to forsake cabinet representation, and in the ensuing general election Vajpayee's alliance was re-elected with an increased majority.

Chronology of kidnap crisis

Dipanker are designated to conduct the negotiation as co-ordinator and deputy co-ordinator.

February 26: Army Chief Lt General Harunur Rashid visits Guniapara army camp (locally known as Betchhari army camp) and expresses rigid stand against withdrawal of the cordon. He also meets Minister Kalparanjan.

At a press briefing before leaving for Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina issues threat of army intervention, if the abductors refuse to sit for negotiations.

February 21: Kalparanjan Chakma and Chairman of CHT Refugee Task Force Dipanker Talukder MP hold talks with representatives of the abductors at Dosharpara, near the Satero Miller Matha, in the evening.

February 22: Kalparanjan and Dipanker again meet the representatives at the same place in the evening and arrange a direct talk with the abductors the next day.

Army raids four villages in the red zone area and nabs some 28 relatives of the abductors.

February 25: Kalparanjan and

March 5 in response to appeal made by the abductors.

March 3: Kalparanjan hopes to secure release of the hostages within the next two days. Abductors demand safe passage.

March 4: Ransom issue triggers speculation and debate jeopardising negotiations.

March 5: Chittagong GOC Major General Abdul Matin meets Kalparanjan at Rangamati. Public meeting at Kutukchhari decided. An eight-kilometre-by-two-kilometre safe passage is demarcated by yellow and red flags to facilitate release of the hostages.

March 6: Kalparanjan urges from a public meeting at Kutukchhari the tribals to help free the hostages within three days or face army operation.

March 9: After the Eid-ul-Azha vacation, Director General of Prime Minister's Office in Rangamati Momin Ullah Patowary and PSO Major General Syeed visit Guniapara. Head of Political Department of the British High Commission in Bangladesh Gra-

ham Clough takes over from Press Officer John Geddes.

March 10: Major General Matin meets Mominullah and Syeed. Authorities distribute leaflets, renewing appeal requesting tribal people to help release the hostages.

March 11: Chief of Army Staff Lt General Harun-Or Rashid holds meeting with JSS Chief and CHT Regional Council Chairman Jyotindra Bodhipriya Lama alias Shantu Lama.

March 12: Kalparanjan departs the scene and Dipanker renews attempt to re-establish communication and initiate indirect negotiations with the abductors.

March 14, 15: Chakma Raja Debashish Roy makes appeal for the first time to release the hostages from motivation rally at Kawkhali.

March 16: Dipanker and Brigade Commander of Rangamati Brigadier Golam Robbani go to Guniapara in the morning expecting release of the hostages.

March 17: Hostages are freed.