Ruling party yet to create atmosphere for joining JS: AL

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in Parliament Abdul Hamid has said his party is keen to take part in parliament proceedings from its next session, but the ruling party's attitude is still unfavourable.

"Although we are for joining parliament sittings from the second session, the ruling party is yet to create a congenial atmosphere for this as they feel comfortable in the House without the main opposition party," he thought.

The immediate past Speaker was briefing newsmen at an Iftar party hosted by him at the Sangsad Bhaban yesterday.

"We will continue to protest both in the House and in the streets repression by the ruling party as people have voted us to speak on the floor," he said. But the BNP-led ruling coalition has already created a situation so that 'we cannot get into the House.'

Quoting from speeches of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and her cabinet colleague Abdul Manna Bhuiyan in the House on the proposed ban on hartal and student politics, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition said these clearly indicated a design to infringe on people's democratic right.

He also referred to 'post election atrocities' on opposition activists and the minority community, harassment of opposition leaders by filing 'baseless' corruption cases, 'unabated' looting, rape and murders across the country by 'ruling party activists.'

"Despite such an adverse situation, we want to attend parliament proceedings from its next session," he said. The matter would be discussed at the party forum and before a 'final decision' is taken.

About the way the parliament functioned during the main opposition party's abstention from its maiden session, the former Speaker said it seemed that the House was run 'not by the Chair but through dictation' from the floor. Such practices tarnish the image of parliament, he felt.

Hamid found no justification of repeal of the Father of the Nation's Family Members Security Act which provided life-long state security for Sheikh Hasina and her younger sister Sheikh Rehana.

Criticising the law minister's speeches during passage of the bill in the maiden session of the House, Hamid said the minister placed an 'unrealistic figure' of the expenditure for this. Hamid also questioned the special security provided to former president Shahabuddin Ahmad and former chief of the caretaker government Latifur Rahman.

Obituary

Begum Mehjabeen Ashraf Sakhawat, 65, wife of Kazi Md Sakhawatullah died Tuesday.

Her namaz-e-janaza will be held at Rajarbag Police Lines maidan after Jumma prayers today.

Her Qulkhani will be held tomorrow at her residence -- 1/1 New Baily Road, Dhaka, after *asar* prayers.

Security beefed up

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Uniformed and plainclothes police were posted around Indian High Commission and police patrol also was geared up.

High police officials visited the Gulshan-Baridhara diplomatic enclave and the Indian High Commission in the evening.

Movements of suspects are also under sharp vigilance by the intelligence, a senior police officer said.

Extortionists run amok

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In the city's shopping centers, extortion has taken a new dimension this time around. The shopkeepers 'are happy to pay protection money' to the police and the goons on a daily basis in exchange for 'peaceful trading'. The protection money changes hands in the name of iftar for the on-duty security personnel and 'boys from the locality who are always alert to drive away outsiders'.

Hundreds of thousands of unauthorised shops on footpaths are the worst victims of extortion. In Gulistan and Baitul Mukarram areas, half a dozen different bodies including, the Dhaka City Corporation, the police, some labour organisations, the Detective Branch and political party activists collect fixed the amounts of money from the traders every day.

"You wait here for half an hour, and you will see one or the other toll collector coming to us for money ranging from Tk 10 to Tk 30," said a trader at Gulistan who have been running a small business of readymade garments for over ten years. He added that during this Eid, extortionists have become more active than ever before.

The Inspector General of Police (IGP), Mudavvir Hussain Chowdhury, told The Daily Star that he had received reports of such incidents of extortion, and the police have arrested the culprits whenever specific complaints were made.

When asked to comment on the allegation of police involvement in extortion, the IGP said that it was a 'hypothetical' charge against the law enforcers.

"We have instances of cops being arrested, charge-sheeted and convicted for their involvement in extortion. So, if there is a specific complaint against an individual, whoever may he be, we will not hesitate to take action," the police chief said.

"During the Eid, there is always a propaganda about an increase in the incidents of extortion ," he said.

Going home

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take necessary measures to prevent overloading of passenger vessels, especially before Eid.

The directive came following a writ filed by Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) with legal assistance from BELA.

At least 204 people were killed on the night before Eid-ul-Fitr in December last year as an overloaded passenger launch Rajhangshi sank in the river Meghna after being hit by another passenger launch.

Al Qaida

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Taliban fighters announced a new Thursday deadline which passed without any sign of fighters coming down from the hills.

"I heard an al Qaida fighter say on the radio they don't want to surrender," Haji Atiqullah, a spokesman for anti-Taliban commander Haji Zahir, told Reuters.

"They said 'we want martyrdom we will succeed'. They won't accept... I tried to talk to them yesterday but they did not want to."

The narrow, pitted and twisting road to Tora Bora from Jalalabad, some 40 km (25 miles) to the north, was choked with traffic. Pickup trucks filled with armed men were travelling in both directions.

One Western security adviser familiar with the road said there were far more of them than normal and speculated that they may be preparing for a push on the al Qaida hideouts.

In Kabul, Karzai met ousted president Burhanuddin Rabbani and other leaders in a wing of the presidential palace. He had flown in from Kandahar, where he had overseen the surrender of the late Taliban stronghold.

"They discussed the general situation, especially the situation in Kandahar," a Rabbani spokesman told reporters. Tribal factions have been jockeying for power in Kandahar.

Rabbani, sidelined by last week's Bonn accord on a post-Taliban power sharing deal, accused foreign powers on Wednesday of imposing a government on Afghanistan.

But he also said he fully supported the choice of Karzai to head a new interim government that is due to come to power on December 22.

Even when that happens, the US campaign in Afghanistan will remain incomplete unless bin Laden is captured or killed. Newspaper reports have stirred confusion over the whereabouts of the guerilla chief, who has a $25 million price on his head.

The Christian Science Monitor, quoting a Saudi financier and senior operative in al Qaida, reported the militant had left Tora Bora and entered Pakistan 10 days ago, aided by tribesmen. Pakistan dismissed the report and Washington was sceptical.

A London-based Arabic magazine, al-Majallah, quoted another bin Laden aide as saying he was still in Afghanistan directing the battle against US forces and their tribal allies.

Shahriar

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The sources said the cell is trying to extract information from Shahriar regarding his alleged involvement in anti-state activities.

The JIC was very tight-limped about yesterday's interrogation. JIC sources said they are thoroughly scrutinising again the snaps and video footage seized from Shahriar.

Shahriar was detained by Special Branch police at Zia International Airport on November 22 on his arrival from Kolkata.

Winter

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Wednesday, the minimum temperature yesterday was 12.2 degree celsius making it the lowest minimum in the country.

In Dhaka City, the minimum temperature was 15 degree celsius and the maximum 21.5 degree celsius. Rajshahi had 13.5 degree celsius, Bogra 15.2 degree celsius, Rangpur 15 degree celsius and Dinajpur 14.4 degree celsius.

The reason for the temperature not going down further was the presence of moisture from the Arabian Sea getting entangled with the Westerly system that brought the cold.

Until the moisture leaves the westerly system, fog may occur. However the temperature may go down further in the coming days letting the winter set in firmly, a senior meteorologist said.

Dhaka refutes

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ULFA, a militant group fighting for an independent homeland in Assam, has been operating out of well-entrenched bases inside Bhutan for years.

"But the Bhutan government has given the rebels until the end of this year to wind up their camps or face being forced out by the army."

Meghalaya Chief Minister Anderson Khanglam was also quoted as saying, "We are committed not to allow any rebel groups to use Meghalaya as a safe haven."

Women's seat in JS

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However, the previous provision of choosing 30 women MPs through voting by the 300 directly elected lawmakers, a provision that virtually made women lawmakers a choice of the treasury bench, is still being favoured by most. A section of the government leaders insist on doubling the number of female MPs while others are opposed to the idea as the House, currently having a sitting arrangement for 358, cannot accommodate that many women lawmakers.

But, the number of women lawmakers is so far not a big issue. And most of the policy planners are unanimous about restoration of the previous system of indirectly electing women lawmakers apparently to have the entire quota at their disposal. They argue that direct election of women MPs would be a kind of general election, involving huge expenditures, and 'not practical' under the existing socio-economic and political realities.

The second option is that all the parties represented in the parliament will share the women's quota of 30 or more seats according to their respective strength. This will enable the main opposition party, AL, and the second largest one, Jatiya Party, to have a share of the women's quota. But this will deprive the ruling coalition of a small portion of the quota.

The third arrangement being discussed by a section of the government leaders involves a radical change in both the number and the mode of election of the women MPs. It suggests that either geographical territories or the country's population determine the constituencies of women lawmakers and that such MPs be elected through a popular vote.

Nonetheless, chances are bleak for the last two options, especially the third one, to be incorporated in the planned bill for the women's seats in the House.

The BNP in its election manifesto however had pledged to increase the number of MPs from women's quota and arrange direct election of such legislators.

A law ministry official indicated that the government might ultimately go for reviving the previous provision for women's seats.

"The planned bill may also provide for direct election of the women lawmakers and an increase in their number only to come into force from the next parliament," he said.

The issue of women's share in parliament gathered political debates during the tenure of the last AL government when the constitutional provision on the issue was about to lapse. Different political parties and women organisations came up with a wide range of suggestions. Direct election of such MPs and an increase in their number featured high in public debates and discussions at that time. The leading women bodies took to the streets to press their demand for direct election of the women lawmakers by raising their number to 64, one from each district.

The AL government also had a series of consultations with the agitating women activists who had their views incorporated in the parliamentary standing committee report on the bill introduced in the last parliament. However, such views did not get a place in the provision of the bill although the government agreed to accommodate any suggestions once the opposition had supported its move. But the opposition's reluctance about the crucial women issue had frustrated the government initiative to keep the women's quota in parliament alive.

The AL bill requiring constitutional amendments fell flat due to lack of supports from the then BNP-led opposition that was in a continuous boycott of the proceedings, causing a shortage of two-thirds members in the House, a strength needed to pass a bill of such a kind. Despite appeals from the women rights organisations, the BNP refused to help pass the AL-sponsored bill, arguing that the opposition was not consulted with on the content of the bill. For a reminder, the past government kept the bill pending for more than a year in abortive bids to get support and incorporate views of the opposition.

Commanding more than two-thirds members in the House, the ruling coalition will find no difficulty in passing the planned bill whatever measures it opts for.

The AL that failed to pass a similar bill due to non-cooperation of the BNP prefers a consensus on the crucial issue involving constitutional rights of the women who constitute half the country's population.

"Whatever be the number of women MPs or the mode of their election, this should be decided through a government-opposition consensus," Deputy Leader of the Opposition Abdul Hamid said. Hamid regretted that the government was yet to consult with the opposition on the issue.The parliament had 15 seats reserved for women for 10 years since the country's independence. The number was later raised to 30 for the following 10 years to be continued for another 10 years. The fourth parliament had no reserved seats and so is the case with the present one till date.

Intellectuals Day

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Opposition Sheikh Hasina gave separate messages paying glowing tributes to the martyred intellectuals

Different socio-cultural and political organisations have chalked out elaborate programmes in observance of the day.

Sammilito Sangskritik Jote (SSJ) will organise a function at the Central Shaheed Minar at 3:00 pm.

Intellectuals, poets and members of the martyred intellectuals will take part at the function.

The Eleven Party Alliance will hold a meeting at the gate of the Martyred Intellectuals Memorial at Mirpur at 8 am with a call to uphold the spirit of the Liberation War.

The Workers Party will place wreaths at the memorial in the morning. Communist Party Bangladesh (CPB) and Left Democratic Alliance (LDF) have also chalked out programmes in observance of the day.

Members of Dhaka Reporters Unity (DRU) will place wreaths at the memorial in the morning.

Meanwhile, the Bangabandhu Sangskritik Jote organised a human chain in front of the Jatiya Press Club reiterating its demand for trial of the killers of the intellectuals.

Israel cuts ties with Arafat

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response to the deadliest Palestinian attack so far against Jewish settlers in the occupied territories, when militants bombed a bus and then shot fleeing survivors and rescue teams.

But the missile strikes on Palestinian Authority targets in Gaza City, Nablus, Ramallah and Gaza international airport were merely the first step of Israel's promised response.

Sharon and his right-leaning cabinet declared at an emergency overnight meeting that Arafat was "irrelevant" and had failed to do anything to prevent the attack outside the settlement of Emmanuel, near Nablus, and a simultaneous double suicide bombing at a Gaza Strip settlement.

The bus ambush was claimed by a first-time alliance of the largest Islamic militant group Hamas and a secular offshoot of Yasser Arafat's own Fatah movement, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade.

A senior official from Sharon's office warned of stepped-up military action in the Palestinian territories in the wake of the attacks, although Israel said it was not aiming personally at Arafat, who is stranded in Ramallah in the West Bank.

"We will carry out clean-up operations on the ground with the aim of arresting the terrorists, dismantling their organisational infrastructure and confiscating their arms -- everything the Palestinian Authority has not done, contrary to their pledges," the official said.

"These operations will be systematically carried out in the coming days, area by area," said the official, warning that they would be "much tougher" than in the past.

"They will not only target the Islamists from Hamas, Islamic Jihad, but also those Fatah and Force-17 members implicated in terrorist activity," added the official, referring to Arafat's own movement and his personal guard respectively.

The Palestinian Authority condemned the anti-Israeli attacks and hastily ordered the closure of all Hamas and Islamic Jihad offices after the bombing runs started overnight, but Israel did not even pause to comment on the move.

"From now on we are going to totally ignore Yasser Arafat, who is no longer a partner for us, and wage war against terrorism as if he did not exist," Justice Minister Meir Sheetrit, a close ally of Sharon, said.

"We hope that in Arafat's entourage certain responsible people will understand that they have to take things in hand," he added.

But Sheetrit said there was no intention to reoccupy permanently Palestinian areas granted autonomy under the 1993 Oslo peace accord, or break up his Palestinian Authority.

As he spoke Israeli tanks had already shot their way into Ramallah and took up positions just 200 metres (yards) from Arafat's West Bank headqaurters, where the beleaguered leader was bunkered down.

One Palestinian policeman was killed and another wounded, Palestinian security sources said, taking the death toll from the 14-month Palestinian uprising to 1,085.

Israeli army bulldozers also demolished the Palestinian television and radio broadcasting centre in Ramallah, in the West Bank, and were preparing to blow up the main transmitter, an AFP reporter on the scene said.

Bangladesh

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dozen people dead.

"Terrorism can never be a solution of anything. We strongly condemn such terrorist attacks and killings," a BNP press release quoted the party chief as saying.

She mourned the loss of innocent lives in the incident.

Hasina

Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina condemned the terrorist attack on Indian parliament.

"We condemn this dastardly act of terrorism ... We always stand against terrorism and stand for democracy and peace," said Hasina, who is now in USA.

The former prime minister deeply regretted the loss of innocent lives in the incident and called for global unity against all kinds of terrorism.

Suicide attack

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with police.

After the 90-minute battle, Pramod Mahajan, India's parliamentary affairs minister, said "all six terrorists have been killed."

Indian Vice-president Krishan Kant narrowly escaped being killed during the attack, a ruling party spokesman said.

A spokesman for the Hindu nationalist BJP party, V.K. Malhotra, said one of the gunmen who stormed the parliament complex managed to shoot through an open gate at an office inside the building where Kant was working.

"He ... managed to fire at the door of the vice president's office before he was shot down," he said.

Before he died the gunman killed a parliamentary official named as Jagdish Prasad Yadav.

"Had it not been for Yadav who chased him he would have probably managed to enter the office and the vice president would have been killed," Malhotra said.

The gate was open as Kant was about to leave his office to go home. If he had left a couple of minutes earlier he would have been caught in the crossfire, officials said.

Police found explosives in the militants' car and in the turquoise knapsacks the young, clean-shaven, black-haired gunmen slung over their backs as they raced up the steps of the Parliament building, firing their assaults rifles with one hand.

Officials at nearby Ram Manohar Lohia hospital said 17 people 12 policemen and five civilians, were being treated for injuries, including six in critical condition.

After three hours, when the Parliament members had been evacuated, police found and set off a remaining bomb in a controlled explosion. Police said several grenades were also defused.

In what is being called the worst breach of government security since the assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi in 1984, Police Chief, Ajai Raj Sharma, said six police officers and an army commando had been killed when the intruders first opened fire.

Videotape obtained by Associated Press Television News showed the body of the suicide bomber, without arms or legs, laying on a sunlit walkway in front of the sandstone building. The tape showed his five comrades, dressed in green sweaters, race toward the building, then back again behind a wall in the surrounding park, firing their rifles as they where shot by police.

The gunmen had driven through one of the Parliament complex's 12 gates in a white, Indian-made Ambassador car, of the kind used by government officials, said Doordarshan. A siren on the car was wailing and official stickers from Parliament and the Home Ministry were affixed to the windshield, the report said.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee later in a televised address to the nation, pledged to fight a "do or die battle" against terrorism following the attack.

"This was not just an attack on the building, it was a warning to the entire nation," he said.

"For the past two decades, we have been fighting terrorism, now the battle has reached its final phase," he said. "The fight has now reached a decisive stage. It will be a do or die battle," Vajpayee added. "We accept the challenge and we will blunt every attack."

Parliament had just adjourned, but most lawmakers and Cabinet officials were still inside at the time.

The Press Trust of India news agency reported that Vajpayee was just leaving when the attack occurred. Home Minister Lal K Advani said all lawmakers were safe.

Journalists who were inside the building said there were bullet holes on the doorways inside.

Bodies were laying on the lawns and sidewalks near the gate as ambulances rushed to the scene. A television cameraman was also shot, and private Star News said police were firing indiscriminately, including at journalists.

Some started shouting, "terrorists, terrorists," said lawmaker Khara Bela Sain. I couldn't understand anything. There was chaos."

Some of the gunmen were in civilian dress. "After three or four minutes of firing they started throwing grenades," and at least four exploded, Swain said. "I started to run to save my life." Hundreds of rounds were fired as police hid behind cards, trees and the corners of the building. The dramatic standoff was broadcast live on most television stations.

Advani had warned last week that a Bombay man had been arrested on October 2 and told police that he had trained under al-Qaida. he said the terrorism network had planned to attack Britain, Australia and the Indian parliament.

Advani said Thursday that the attack on the country's highest legislative body would spur the Indian people to fight off terrorism. "This attack would cost our attackers heavily," he said.

Hundreds of troops in full battle gear took up positions around the parliament, sealing off the area as security forces throughout Delhi and around the nation were put on red alert.

Soldiers were deployed outside Vajpayee's office and residence as well as key government buildings in the capital, while trucks carrying soldiers moved in and out of the army headquarters in New Delhi.

Political analysts said if today's raid was by Kashmir separatists, India could launch a counter-attack across the Line of Control into Pakistani-held territory, raising the risk of a dangerous confrontation between the nuclear-capable neighbours.

Highlighting that risk, Fernandes told Star News that India must give a hard-hitting response. "This problem (terrorism) has crossed the limit and we have to solve it," he said.

New Delhi has long accused Pakistan of arming and funding Islamic militants fighting against Indian rule in Kashmir, its only Muslim-majority state. Islamabad denies the charge. Some members of parliament did not even want to wait for a claim of responsibility to be made before demanding action.

"Where is the doubt? What is there to prove," asked Raghubir Singh a member of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"The government should do what America has done in Afghanistan and what Israel is doing in Palestine. The government should not shy away from attacking Pakistan, if involvement is proved," Srichand Kripalani, also from the BJP, told Reuters.

Pakistan, US, UK condemn

In Islamabad, a foreign ministry spokesman said that Pakistan strongly and unequivocally condemned the attack.

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf yesterday sent condolences to the Indian Prime Minister following the attack on parliament in New Delhi.

"My government strongly condemns the attack," Musharraf said in his message to Vajpayee.

"Through you I would like to convey our sympathies to the government and people of India as well as our deep condolences to the bereaved families."

Musharraf said he was saddened by the deaths and injuries suffered by Indian security personnel in the attack.

Meanwhile, the US Embassy condemned the attack as an "outrageous act of terrorism." Foreign Secretary Jack Straw of former colonial ruler Britain said the "brutal terrorist attack" was an assault on "the heart of India's democracy."

Delhi police nab three

Delhi police yesterday detained three men in two separate incidents following a general alert issued after an audacious attack on India's parliament complex.

"The two detentions were made in north-west Delhi after the alert was issued this morning," a spokesman for the Delhi police told AFP.

"But we have not been able to establish any links between the men and what happened at parliament this morning," the spokesman said.

Chinese premier's visit

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view that it establishes Bangladesh's importance in the region and opens up new avenues for closer link with China. Incidentally, the Chinese premier's trip comes in less than two years after the high profile visit of Li Peng who came here as the Chairman of the National People's Congress of China in April 1999.

Although the details of Zhu's visit are yet to be worked out, it was learnt that the three-day itinerary will include a visit to a Chinese-assisted development project, handing over of the NAM Conference Centre and a civic reception in his honour. A banquet will be hosted by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

Sources indicated that Khaleda may reciprocate the visit of the Chinese premier by making a trip to China before she makes any other bilateral tour.

A foreign ministry official said the Chinese prime minister's visit will revitalise trade and cultural cooperation between the two countries.

Bangladesh has received Chinese cooperation and assistance in several sectors, including in the setting up and expansion of power plants at Rauzan, the Barapukuria coal mine projects, and in building a catalogue of bridges.

Bangladesh has also a significant level of defence cooperation with China, a major supplier of military hardware, another official pointed out.

China, during the trip of its prime minister, is likely to announce a fresh package of soft-term loans for bridge and power projects.

The grand International Conference Centre built for the scuttled NAM Summit at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar at a cost of 24 million US dollar with interest-free Chinese loans will be formally handed over to Bangladesh by the visiting dignitary.

The visiting premier will pay a courtesy call on President AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury while the Speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad, Jamiruddin Sircar, will also hold talks with him.

At the official level talks between Khaleda and Zhu, the Bangladesh premier is likely to urge the Chinese leader and the business community to make use of investment opportunities in Bangladesh.

Khaleda is also expected to urge the Chinese trade delegation to explore prospects of importing Bangladeshi products. Dhaka will also stress the need for reducing the yawning trade gap between the two countries which tilts heavily against Bangladesh.

"Our stress will also be on China's import of more non-traditional items to balance out the trade deficit", an official said.

During the Chinese premier's visit, the date for the next Bangladesh-China Joint Economic Commission is likely to be fixed.