

India to recall HC to Pakistan, snap bus-rail links from Jan 1

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India yesterday decided to recall its high commissioner to Pakistan Vijay Nambiar and snap its rail and road link with that country, from Jan 1, charging Islamabad with not taking action against terrorist outfits involved in Dec 13 attack on Indian parliament.

The decision came in the wake of rising tension between the two countries following the December 13 terrorist attack on Indian parliament, an external affairs ministry spokesperson said. India blamed Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad for the attack and said Pakistan has failed to take action against those terrorist outfits even after India provided evidence of their involvement in the attack on Parliament in New Delhi.

The spokesperson in reply to a question ruled out any dialogue between Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and President Pervez Musharraf on the sideline of SAARC summit in Katmandu.

"The question of talking to Pakistan given its attitude and its unresponsiveness in taking meaningful action against India does not really arise," the spokesperson said. "Pakistan should take meaningful action based on the demands contained in the verbal demarche delivered last Friday, she said.

"In view of complete lack of concern on the part of Pakistan and its continued promotion of cross-border terrorism, the government of

India has decided to recall its high commissioner in Islamabad," the spokesperson said.

The government would terminate the Samjhauta Express rail link and Delhi-Lahore bus service between the two countries from January 1, she said.

India had issued a diplomatic 'demarche' to Pakistan a week ago, demanding that Islamabad stop the activities of the Kashmiri militant groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad, arrest their leaders and freeze their assets.

New Delhi says it has proof that the two groups, acting at the behest of Pakistani military intelligence, carried out the attack on the parliament complex in New Delhi which claimed 14 lives, including those of the five assailants.

Pakistan and both militant outfits have denied any involvement.

Yesterday's measures marked India's first direct retaliation for last week's attack.

The Indian government said Wednesday that it was keeping "all options open" amid calls from hardliners for military reprisals, including strikes against alleged terrorist training camps in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

Pakistan has warned that it would respond in kind to any act of "adventurism" on India's part.

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Armed gang attacks villagers: 25 houses destroyed, 25 hurt in Arahazar UZ



A housewife at village Aguandi in Arahazar upazila wail after armed terrorists allegedly led by BNP men ransacked and looted their house (top) and two other women sit on their empty homestead as the house was completely damaged in the attack yesterday.

Political revenge?

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

An armed gang allegedly belonging to ruling BNP attacked Aguandi village in Arahazar upazila in Narayanganj district yesterday leaving at least 25 villagers injured and 25 houses destroyed.

They looted valuables during the four-hour rampage in the village, 10 kilometres from the upazila headquarters. The village was in a shambles after the attack, witnesses said.

Local people alleged that the attack was made as the villagers supported Awami League in the October 1 general election. "They came from adjoining areas, beat villagers mercilessly and looted whatever they got," said one villager.

Some people alleged that on Tuesday last, the local BNP men announced their plan to attack the village. The residents of the village were passing days in panic since then.

The also alleged that police reached the spot nearly after an hour after the attackers left the place.

However, Narayanganj Police Superintendent Shafiqul Islam, after visiting the spot, told newsman that the situation was normal. He said police moved there immediately after they were informed.

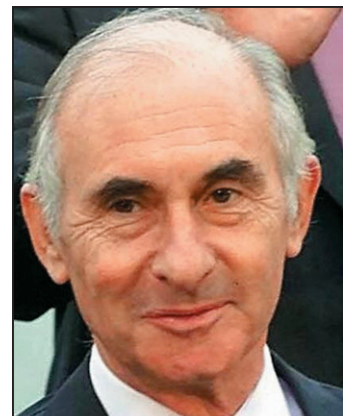
Many villagers left homes apprehending more attacks, local people said.

Mannan, a Union Parishad member and an Awami League supporter with a good number of followers in the village, was the prime target of the attackers, they said.

The villagers started fleeing when several hundred BNP supporters equipped with lethal weapons were coming from the neighbouring Mardasadi village through paddy fields and swooped on the house of Mannan.

The 'terrorists' were allegedly led by Jaill, Laizuddin, Taizuddin, Abul Proshan and some others launched

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Ousted De la Rúa blasts Peronists

AP, Buenos Aires

Driven from power by a devastating economic crisis and deadly riots, outgoing President Fernando De la Rúa returned to his offices for a last time yesterday to await the formal handover to a caretaker government.

Looking somber in a dark suit, De la Rúa arrived at the Casa Rosada, or Government House, and lashed out at the opposition Peronists for failing to join him in a government of "national unity."

"The Peronists made a mistake," said De la Rúa, saying their refusal to join him in a reorganized government as he had requested Thursday had hastened events that triggered

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US Cong team due in Jan

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

A two-member US Congressional team will visit Bangladesh during the second week of January on a fact finding mission relating to trade and investment, official sources said.

Congressman Joseph Crowley, leader of the Bangladesh caucus in the US Congress, will lead the team.

The visit is being seen as an important one as they will study the export market here with particular focus on problems related to the readymade garments sector.

Canadian Minister Meanwhile, Canadian Minister for International Cooperation Maria Minna will pay a five-day visit to Bangladesh in January.

The minister is expected to visit some CIDA projects during his stay here from January 8 to 12.

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	Sun Rises	Sun Sets
Dec 22		5-17 pm
Dec 23	6-38 am	

Prayer Timings		
Dec 22		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fajr	5-30	6-00
Zohr	12-45	1-15
Asr	3-45	4-00
Maghrib	5-25	5-30
Esha	7-30	8-00

Source: Islamic Foundation

4 SAARC members to form S Asian Business Forum

M SHAMSUR RAHMAN, from Kolkata

Four SAARC members -- Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India -- yesterday agreed to form a new forum styled "South Asian Business Forum" to improve balance of trade among them.

The agreement was reached at a meeting of commerce secretaries of the four countries, held at a hotel in Calcutta. Presidents of apex trade bodies of the four countries also attended the meeting.

The meeting also identified a number of sectors including power and energy that could be used for improving the existing huge trade gaps among the neighboring countries.

The agreement came as SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation) apparently became ineffective due to a big member's non-reciprocation of extensive trade liberalisation by its

two small neighbours -- Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, sources observed.

The spirit of SAARC is also being dampened by the rising tension between the two leading members, India and Pakistan. The annual SAARC Summit was postponed in the last three years.

The present volume of trade among SAARC countries is negligible at 3.5 per cent while another such grouping like the European Union conducts 60 per cent of its total trading among its members.

Meeting sources said ADB initiated the move for formation of the sub-regional trading block.

The meeting discussed measures for improving balance of payment among the four countries, which include removing tariff and non-tariff barriers among them.

Talking to this correspondent after the meeting, Yussuf Abdullah Harun, President of the Federation

of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI), said the meeting discussed ways of removing tariff barriers among members of the proposed South Asian Business Forum through discussion.

"The meeting also discussed the need for policy changes in some of the member countries".

He said a number of sectors have been identified, which could help overcome the huge trade gaps among the member countries. These include power and energy, information technology, entertainment, tourism and transport and human resources.

"Bangladesh has been asked to prepare a paper on human resources and place it at the next meeting", he said.

Bangladesh has been demand-

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Brother of slain government employee Zahidur Rahman (inset) mourns with two children of the victim in his lap. Rahman was shot dead by unidentified assailants at his Tajmahal road residence in the city yesterday morning.

2 murdered in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two people were murdered in separate incidents in the city within a span of 24 hours ending at 8.00am yesterday.

A gang of four entered the ground floor residence of Zahidur Rahman, statistics assistant of the Survey Department of Bureau of Statistics, through an open door of the house at Taj Mahal Road in city's Mohammadpur area at about 7.30am.

They tied up the hands of housemaid Delwara Begum and then forced their way into the bedroom. They forcibly collected the keys of the different wardrobes and almirahs of the house from Rahman's wife, Hira, who was

sleeping with her two children in the room.

The gang opened the almirah in the room and took out a .22 bore rifle from it. They then went to the sitting room where Rahman was sleeping and shot him in the head. He died on the spot.

Hearing the gunshot, the victim's wife and her children rushed to the room and found Rahman in a pool of blood.

After shooting Rahman the gang left the scene on motorbikes. Other than the rifle, nothing was taken from the house.

Police later recovered the body and sent it to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) morgue for autopsy.

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Teenage sisters gangraped

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two teenage sisters were gangraped at their house at Mirpur Section-1 in the city on Thursday night.

The victims work at a garment factory in the area. A gang of five entered the victims' house at about 10.30pm on the night. They tied up the teenagers and raped them at gunpoint.

As the two sisters cried for help, local people came forward and chased the gang. They caught two of the gang -- Mosharrarf and Liton -- and beat them mercilessly. The others fled away.

The two were later handed over to Mirpur police.

One of the victim filed a case with Mirpur police station.

4 drown as ferry capsizes

UNB, Barguna

Four people drowned as a ferryboat capsized in the river Bishkhali yesterday morning.

Two of the victims were identified as Nuru Shikder, 50, and Shahid, 30. Identity of two others could not be known.

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AL finalises 4 by-election candidates

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Awami League (AL) yesterday finalised its candidates in four constituencies out of five where by-elections will be held on January 17.

President Prof. AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury, Leader of the Opposition in parliament Sheikh Hasina and AL Presidium Member Abdur Razzak vacated the seats.

The Awami League Parliamentary Board, at a meeting with party's acting president Abdus Samad Azad in the chair, finalised the list of candidates after taking interviews of the aspirants in four seats. The nomination for the remaining seat will be announced shortly, a party press release said.

According to the board decision, Sukumar Ranjan Gosh will contest in Munshiganj-1, Mohammad Azizul Haque in Narail-1, Md. Shorab Hossain in Narail-2 and Golam Sarwar Forkan in Barguna-3 constituencies.

Of the four seats, the first one was vacated by President Prof.

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CID to take up Bagerhat BNP leader murder case

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Bagerhat BNP leader M A Awal murder case will be handed over to Khulna CID on Monday for investigation.

Case docket will be sent to CID office today, said a reliable source.

M A Awal, vice president of Bagerhat district BNP, was gunned down by unidentified persons on December 5 at Jatrapur bazar under Sadar thana.

Police have so far made no headway in the investigation. Jubo League activists Selim Azad and Khalil were arrested on December 7, but they denied their involvement in the murder.

OC of Bagerhat Sadar thana yesterday said fair investigation is not possible as the murder was a sequel to Intra-party rivalry.

Meanwhile, two CID officials visited the place of occurrence twice and took stock of investigation made so far by the IO of Bagerhat Sadar thana.

Second Round Block Bidding meets 'unofficial death'

SHARIER KHAN

The four-year-old Second Round Block Bidding for oil and gas exploration has met with an "unofficial death" with the change of government and subsequent withdrawal of a bidder-- Maersk Olie, sources said.

When the tenure of Awami League (AL) government ended in July, the government's negotiation committee on the Second Round Block Bidding was still holding talks with three international oil companies-- Maersk Olie, Petronas and Tullow.

Maersk Olie was supposed to sign a Production Sharing Contract (PSC) for two off-shore blocks-- 19 and 20 -- back in June 12. But it was delayed as the energy ministry was taking time to scrutinise the proposed deal in the last moment.

The European company that initially the PSC on July 19 last year formally withdrew from the Second

Round Bidding mainly on the ground that the bidding process was too slow.

In a letter in October Maersk also said the company was reducing its global activities in the face of recession.

The only negotiation left for finalisation is that for Block 11. Malaysian company Petronas and Irish company Tullow were advised by the previous government to agree on a joint venture in this block. The negotiation was at an uncertain stage as Petronas and Tullow could not fully agree on a partnership when the tenure of AL government ended.

However as the High Court recently imposed restriction on signing of any PSC, there is no possibility of any negotiation between the government and Petronas-Tullow. But most importantly, the sources said, the new government has not yet given any instruction to revive the negotiations.

"The government's actions against any deal made or initiated during the tenure of Awami League government gives us the impression that the Second Round Bid is virtually dead," said a source involved in PSC negotiations. "It does not matter whether we officially announce it or not."

The Second Round Bidding was floated in June 15, 1997 with an objective that it will be concluded by December 15 of the same year. Twenty-one oil companies participated in the bidding.

Till the change of government, four PSCs for four blocks were signed. The first was Unocal's PSC for Block 7 and the second was of Tullow-Chevron-Texaco-Bapex for Block 9. The third and the fourth were signed with Shell Oil for blocks 5 and 10.

Petrobangla had also initiated

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New Afghan govt takes over today

AFP, Kabul

The transfer of power to Afghanistan's interim government, led by Pashtun royalist Hamid Karzai, is to take place in a two-hour ceremony held at the presidential palace this morning.

The inauguration, which will include speeches, prayers and recitations from the Quran, is to start at 11:00 am local time.

A contingent of 53 British Marines Friday began a "peace support operation" which will provide security for the fledgling government as it attempts to bring stability to the war-ravaged nation.

The Royal Marines arrived Thursday as the vanguard of an international force, backed unanimously by the UN Security Council, which will eventually number some 3,000 troops.

The Marines, accompanied by Afghan security forces, will escort dignitaries flying in for the ceremony from Bagram air base, about 50 kilometres north of the capital, to Kabul.

Among those due to speak today are outgoing President Burhanuddin



Hamid Karzai

Rabbani and his political ally, Abdurrah Rasul Sayyaf, both of whom are known to be unhappy about the composition of the 30-member administration which will rule Afghanistan for six months.

Also slated to address the assembly is Lakhdar Brahimi, UN special envoy to Afghanistan. He helped shape the deal clinched in Bonn on December 5 under which the power-

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Govt embarrassed by Khatib's comments at Eid congregation

UNB, Dhaka

Ruling BNP and government leaders appear embarrassed by the comments of Khatib of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque on the Afghan war and Bengali festivals but they cautiously refrained from making any remark.

Moulana Obaidul Huq, at the official Eid congregation at the National Eidgah on December 17, talked about the America-Taliban war, Osama Bin Laden and Pahela Baishak celebrations.

In his edicts the imam reportedly called America and President Bush "number one terrorists" of the world.

The President and other government high-ups attended the main Eid congregation. In his religious sermons the Khatib advised the government not to extend any support to the US for leading a crusade against Islam annihilating Muslims in Afghanistan and Palestine.

A good number of ministers, talking to UNB on condition of anonymity, said the government

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