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People's Right to Know

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Moscow metro suicide bombing kills 40

Chechen rebel suspected, death toll may rise

REUTERS, Moscow

An explosion, apparently caused by a suicide bomber, tore through a packed underground train in Moscow in morning rush-hour yesterday, killing up to 40 people.

"From what we have found so far we can say about 30 people have been killed and about 100 injured," an emergency ministry spokesman told Reuters.

Interfax news agency, quoting ambulance sources, said the death toll had reached 40 and other sources said it could be even higher.

Rescued travelers said the explosion blew out carriage windows and started a fire. One woman said survivors walked about a mile along the tracks to safety.

Police and state security officials said the explosion was likely caused

by a suicide bomber on board the train, crammed with morning commuters.

Interfax quoted investigators as saying first information indicated a woman suicide bomber was behind the attack.

Suicide bomb attacks in Moscow and elsewhere in Russia have been the trademark of Chechen separatist rebels fighting Russian forces for independence in their Muslim

Caucasus homeland.

If confirmed, it would be the worst such attack by Chechen suicide bombers in Moscow since July 2003 when two women blew themselves up at an open-air music festival at the Tushino airfield, killing 14 other people.

The incident took place just six weeks before a March 14 election for president in which the incumbent Vladimir Putin is widely expected to win a second Kremlin term easily.

The explosion occurred at 8:30 a.m. as the train bringing people into the city traveled along a tunnel toward Moscow's busy Paveletskaya station.

The elaborately decorated Stalin-era underground system, the pride of Muscovites for its clean marble tunnels and brisk efficiency, is also one of the world's deepest.

Pictures of the inside of the devastated carriage showed bodies lying among twisted metal and shredded seats.

Dozens of ambulances and fire engines converged on Moscow's Paveletskaya Square, teeming with morning commuters, and evacuated altogether 700 people from underground.

Many of those rushed to hospital were suffering from broken bones and burns.

Moscow underground trains are always packed especially in winter months when people avoid driving because of snow-clogged roads. Trains can often be carrying up to 1,000 people.

Up to two million people commute into Moscow every morning for work. Officials said security had been tightened at all main train stations and airports in and around the capital.

Ekushey Book Fair opens today amid tight security

UNB, Dhaka

'Ekushey Book Fair' begins today on Bangla Academy premises in the city to commemorate the supreme sacrifices of the martyrs of the Language Movement.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia is scheduled to inaugurate the fair at 4:30pm. The exhibition will continue till February 29.

A large number of police and plainclothes security personnel have already been deployed in the area ahead of the prime minister's visit.

Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), student wing of opposition Awami League, yesterday announced a black-flag demonstration protesting the prime minister's

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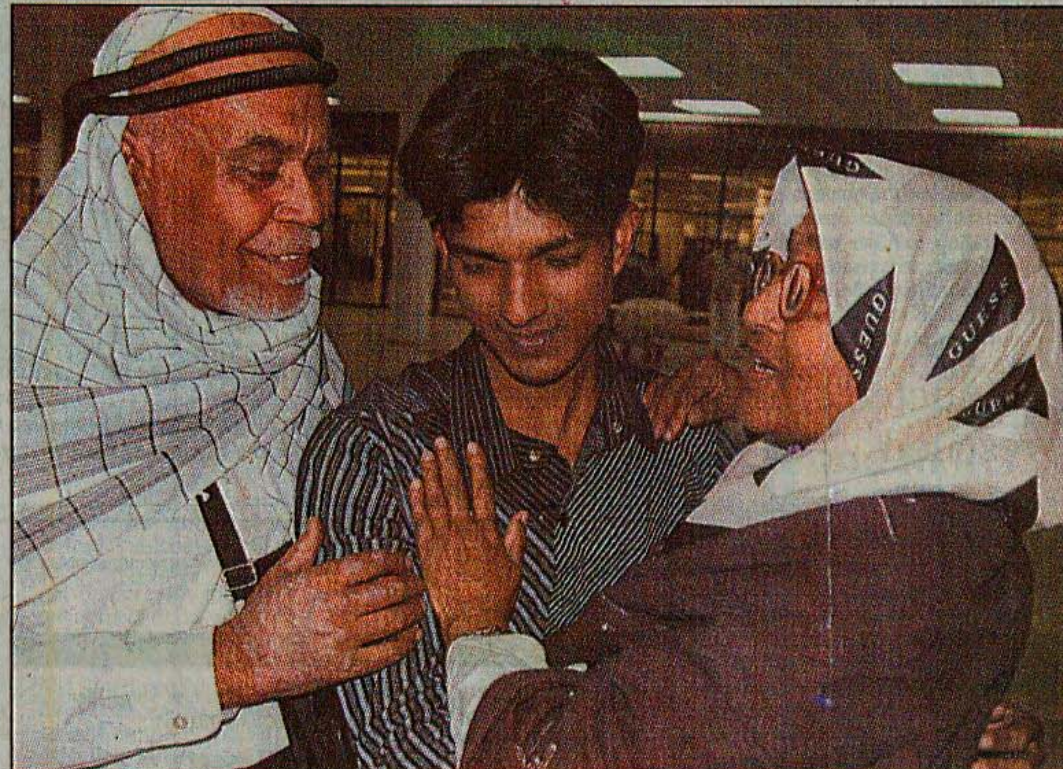


PHOTO: STAR

A grandson receives an elderly couple back from Hajj on the first return Hajj flight at Zia International Airport yesterday.

48-hour road blockade in CHT begins tomorrow

STAR REPORT

A 48-hour road blockade called by the Parbatya Chattagram Jano Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) for the implementation of landmark Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) peace agreement begins in the highlands tomorrow amid strong opposition by Bangla-speaking people.

The PCJSS truncated the road block to 48 hours from 72 hours declared earlier to lessen the sufferings of people who left the region to celebrate the Eid-ul-Azha elsewhere, but Bangla-speakers asked the government to foil the blockade, saying it was bent on blocking people's safe home-return after the festival.

Fight For Equal Rights in the CHT -- a platform of Bangalees -- termed the PCJSS action 'anti-Muslim', as it

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Abductors bargain over ransom to free Bablu

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bandarban

Joint forces are yet to rescue Hasan Mahub Bablu, a director of a resort hotel in Bandarban, five days into his abduction for ransom and an outfit wrote to influential people for a fresh threat that underlines security fears in the highlands.

"We came to know Bablu was safe," a relative told The Daily Star, adding suspected abductors called the hotelier's family.

An unnamed indigenous outfit abducted the co-owner of the hotel, a unit of Guide Tours Limited, on Monday night and demanded Tk 2 crore for his release in the second

such incident in seven days in the restive district.

Security forces in 10 platoons raided suspected hideouts and new Superintendent of Police Iqbal Bahar joined them to speed up the drive, but returned empty-handed.

Sources said the abductors bargained with Guide Tours over the ransom for Bablu's freedom.

The tour operator now plans to close down its hotel, Hasan Mansur Milon, another director, told a meeting of all political parties at the Deputy Commissioner's Office in Bandarban yesterday.

The hotel on acres of gentle slopes earned wide popularity for its

beautiful location in rolling hills with the Shangu river flowing at the bottom.

FRESH THREAT

An outfit self-styled as the Arakan People Army sent letters to local influential people for tolls and The Daily Star correspondent collected a copy that threatens the addressees with dire consequences in the event of failure to pay the money.

Joli Mang, vice-president of Parbatya Chattagram Jano Sanghati Samity, blamed an unnamed indigenous group for joining hands with the rebels of the neighbouring country Myanmar and unleashing

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Cairn gets \$40m IFC loan for greater operation in Bangladesh, India

UNB, Dhaka

International Finance Corporation (IFC) has okayed a \$40 million loan for Scottish Cairn Energy to support the expansion of its operations in Bangladesh and India.

The private sector arm of the World Bank, the IFC this week signed an agreement with Cairn in Washington for expansion of operation of the company in South Asia, particularly in India and Bangladesh.

In providing the loan, officials here said yesterday that the lending agency highly praised Cairn's activities in the region, including Bangladesh, with respect to maintaining social and environmental responsibility.

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AL working out 'tougher' agitation programmes

REAZ AHMAD

In the wake of the government's indifference to Awami League's (AL) one-month ultimatum to meet its 15-point demand, the main opposition party is now chalking out details of what it said is a 'tougher movement' after the scheduled hartal across the country on February 12.

The AL high command is firm on going ahead with the decision of February 5 joint meeting of the party's central working committee and front organisations to turn the 15-point movement into a one-point 'oust-government' movement if there is no positive response to the

ultimatum before its expiry on February 10, party sources said.

The movement programmes now being worked out include mass rallies in divisional headquarters, 'foot-march and train-march' across the country, rail-road barricades and hartal for longer periods.

AL President and Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina gave the ultimatum from a January 10 rally at Paltan Maidan in the capital. The demands include checking the downslide in law and order and unabated price hike of essentials.

Before leaving for Bangkok after the Eid-ul-Azha for a routine medical check-up, AL General Secretary

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Ershad barred at ZIA from going abroad

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Immigration officials at Zia International Airport (ZIA) yesterday barred Jatiya Party (JP) Chairman H M Ershad from going abroad reportedly as per directives of higher authorities.

The former president, who along with his wife Bidisha and son Eric was going to board a flight for Sri Lanka yesterday noon, was stopped at ZIA by immigration officials.

Later, addressing newsmen at his party's Bijoynagar office in the city, Ershad accused the government of violating his civic rights, as there was no legal basis to prohibit him from going out of the country.

The JP chief claimed he always informed the home ministry by letters about his foreign tours, though it was not mandatory for him to do.

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BIMST-EC MEET BEGINS IN THAILAND TODAY

Dhaka wants concession for LDCs



A policeman on guard at the BIMST-EC summit venue in Phuket -- southern Thailand yesterday.

AGENCIES, Dhaka

Bangladesh wants the spirit of Safta (South Asian Free Trade Area) agreement reflected in the proposed free trade area (FTA) agreement under the BIMST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand-Economic Cooperation) so that LDCs get special concession.

"Our economy is not similar to (those of) India or Thailand... We will seek special concession packages for LDCs (least developed countries) as we've got under Safta," Foreign Minister Moshed Khan told journalists prior to his departure for Bangkok to attend the BIMST-EC foreign ministers' meeting scheduled for tomorrow.

A meeting of the BIMST-EC commerce ministers begins today. Under Safta, signed at Saarc (South Asian Association for

Regional Cooperation) summit held in Islamabad last January, four LDCs -- Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives -- will get special tariff concessions from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka when the accord comes into effect in January, 2006.

"As LDCs, we want equitable share in the vast market of the BIMST-EC," Khan said while talking to reporters at Zia International Airport.

About signing of the draft FTA, he

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UP chairmen reel from lawmakers' heat

Demand restoration of authority

SHAKHAWAT LITON

Mohammad Ali Khan, chairman of Mannargon union in Sunamganj, is in a fog about his responsibilities.

He sees the role of the local lawmaker in every activity of his union that limits his authority to act independently for the people who voted him into the office of the local government body.

"It appears that all the union parishad chairmen belong to the opposition party and the legislators belong to the ruling party. We're denied a voice in the initiation of local uplift plans and a say in the expenditure of government funds for the projects," he told The Daily Star.

Echoing him, Idris Ali, chairman of Chanahara union in Chittagong, said: "MPs are the roadblock to strengthening local government

bodies. They do everything instead of devoting their time to lawmaking, limiting us to mere spectators," he said.

"If the trend continues, the government should erase union parishads from the local government system."

According to the constitution, the state will encourage local government institutions comprising representatives of the areas concerned and the Jatiya Sangsad will give the bodies authority to impose taxes for local purposes, prepare their budgets and maintain funds.

Alleging violation of the constitution, the UP chairmen said lawmakers robbed them of their authority.

They said the government often promised to strengthen the local government bodies, but its attitude to them was not healthy.

They said the situation is sliding

fast since 1991 when parliamentary democracy was revived.

The UP Chairmen Association, a national platform of chairmen across Bangladesh, is organising its members to launch a movement for the realisation of their demands and restoration of rights.

The demands include strengthening of the union parishads as per the constitution, curtailment of lawmakers' unwarranted intervention, withdrawal of official orders lowering the local government's authority, an increase in their remuneration, financial power and logistics support.

The association has sent letters to its members asking them to join hands in the interest of strengthening the UPs.

The association at a recent meeting decided to hold a convention on

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Land ports resume operation after Indian exporters call off strike

BSS, Hilli (Dinajpur)

Four land ports in the country's western and northern regions resumed their activities after the Indian Exporters' and Customs Clearing Agents' Associations (IECCAA) called off their indefinite strike yesterday morning.

The impasse in Hilli, Burimari, Sonamasjid and Bhoma land ports ended following an understanding reached between the West Bengal government and the IECCAA in Kolkata on Thursday, said sources close to Bangladesh importers and leaders of the Clearing and Forwarding (C&F) Agents' Association.

However, hearing of the public

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Positive Bangladesh See our special story titled 'the strength within' on page 12.

5 out of 12 bodies handed over 22 still missing; launch vandalised; staff, passengers robbed

AKTER FARUK SHAHIN, Barisal

Wary relatives of the dead or missing cried at coastal destinations in Barisal, as a trawler headed south yesterday, carrying 12 bodies of the passengers killed in a head-on collision between two launches on the Meghna.

The names of 22 missing were posted on a board at the control room in Galachipa, the last destination of the double-decked MV Asha Jaoa that collided with the triple-decker MV Sattar Khan, bound for Dhaka.

The vessels that sail between Barisal and Dhaka were packed with passengers returning to work with their families early Thursday after the three-day Eid-ul-Azha vacation.

In last-ditch efforts, a rescue team of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation pulled three

mangled bodies among the 12 dead by cutting open steel plates of the MV Asha Jaoa that lost much of its bow in the crash and suffered most of the casualties. Police seized the launch.

Barisal district administration said five identified bodies were handed over to relatives after post-mortem and unidentified seven others were sent to Patuakhali district administration for handover after identification.

The MV Parabat-16 and Rajhangsha and other launches plying the Dhaka-Patuakhali route and trawlers passing by the scene hours after the accident carried about 300 stranded passengers to their destinations.

CHAOS

Faridul Islam said he lost his co-traveller Kuddus of Patuakhali in the

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