

Project closes but staff use vehicles

JS body asks social welfare ministry to return them

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A parliamentary body yesterday asked the social welfare ministry to immediately return 20 vehicles allegedly used by its officers despite closure of different projects to the government transport pool.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Welfare Ministry also asked the ministry to open a probe into maintenance of the vehicles and report it at its next

meeting.

Mozammel Haq, convenor of a parliamentary sub-committee, told the meeting that the ministry officials used the vehicles, violating the establishment ministry's guidelines on the use of government transport.

He said two of the 20 vehicles belonged to the projects under the social welfare complex and one to the minister's office.

The committee members criticised Akhter Hossain, director

general (DG) of the Directorate of Social Welfare, for what they said were corrupt practices at his office.

They alleged the sub-committee, formed to probe corruption in rehabilitating evicted sex workers and purchasing substandard bicycles for a project, could not function due to non-cooperation of Mozammel.

The DG admitted he could not cooperate on the investigation because of some problems and pledged to provide all-out support in

future.

Mozammel alleged that over Tk 28 crore was overdrawn from different projects for the elderly, widows and freedom fighters. Another member, Shah Shahid Sarwar, echoed his view, saying there were some irregularities in different projects at the field level, meeting sources said.

A member told the meeting that

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Transport workers trigger traffic jam over police beating in Gulistan

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Traffic at Gulistan, Bangabazar and Chankharpool screeched to a halt for over an hour yesterday, stretching the snarl-up into the areas close by as transport workers parked buses on Gulistan roads following arrest of two of their colleagues.

Transport workers alleged that Assistant Commissioner Mahbub of Rapid Action Team (Rat) beat up Faisal Ahmed Faruq and Mamun while they were working as linemen to ease traffic jam at Gulistan at around 12:40pm.

"The police officer became

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Iraq bombers strike Polish base, kill 11

REUTERS, Hilla, Iraq

Suicide car bombers killed at least 11 Iraqis and wounded 58 foreign troops yesterday in twin attacks on a military base south of Baghdad in the run-up to a UN report on the feasibility of direct elections in Iraq.

A spokesman for Polish-led forces in Hilla, about 60 miles south of Baghdad, said 44 Iraqis were injured in the blast. The wounds of the soldiers were not life-threatening.

Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Strzelecki told the news agency that guards outside the base managed to stop one of the cars by shooting at it but that a second car exploded after smashing into a wall.

"At 7:15 local time near the logistics base there was a terrorist attack using two cars," Strzelecki said. "We found the bodies of the two drivers, and two Iraqis standing in the street were killed."

US-led Coalition Provisional Authority spokeswoman Hilary White later put the death toll much higher.

"We can confirm that more than 11 Iraqis were killed," she told Reuters. "It killed men, women and children."

The blasts blew the facing and roofs off of homes outside the base, and, like car bombs last week that killed about 100 people as they enlisted in the Iraqi army and police, left survivors blaming Iraq's US occupiers for the bloodshed.

"We heard the sound of a plane overhead and a rocket landed and then a second rocket landed," said Omar Zayed, 17, who lives near the site of the explosion.

The attacks are the latest in a string against soldiers of countries helping the United States occupy Iraq, and highlighted the violence that threatens US plans to formally hand sovereignty over to Iraqis by

mid-year.

Those plans -- whose June 30 deadline has been deemed sacred by a US administration mounting its campaign for US presidential elections in November -- have been derailed by calls for elections before the formal transfer of sovereignty, rather than the series of caucuses Washington wanted.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan expects to rule this week on the plan, after dispatching a team to Iraq to judge the feasibility of holding direct elections as demanded by the top religious authority for Shia Muslims who make up 60 percent of Iraq's population.

UN DECISION IN DAYS

According to a US plan agreed in November with Iraq's US-appointed Governing Council, regional caucuses would be held to

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Huda sorry for joking about Ershad

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Communications Minister Nazmul Huda yesterday withdrew his February 8 remarks in parliament about the government decision to bar Jatiya Party (JP-Ershad) Chairman HM Ershad from going abroad on vacation.

Huda said Ershad was barred to safeguard the (matrimonial) rights of Rowshan Ershad (Ershad's first wife).

Huda's comment followed a JP-E walkout from the House protesting the incident on February 6 when immigration officials at Zia International Airport prevented Ershad, his second wife Bidisha and

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13 vehicles looted in C'nawabganj

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

Robbers looted five long-haul coaches, four minibuses and as many trucks on Dhaka-Chapainawabganj highway at Bijoy Nagar, Basantapur and Raninagar in Godagari upazila early yesterday.

A gang of 25 equipped with firearms and sharp weapons forced the vehicles to stop by placing logs on the highway and looted valuables including gold ornaments, cellphones and cash said to be worth about Tk 20 lakh from passengers and truckers.

The gang also blasted hand-made bombs during their hour-long operation since 2:00am, police said.

Police arrested four suspects Suresh, Sadek, Shaheb Ali and Mikail after Chapainawabganj Bus-Minibus Owners' Association President Lutfor Rahman filed a case.

Death threat to 2 Bagerhat journalists

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Two journalists of Bagerhat received death threat through two separate letters delivered to them from post office Tuesday noon.

They are Zakaria Mahmud, correspondent of Dainik Banglabazar Patrika and Molla Abdur Rob, correspondent of Dainik Khabarpatra.

The letters were posted from Bagerhat Head Post Office on February 16. The journalists have been asked to stop writing reports or face the same fate of Manik Saha.

Zakaria and Rob filed two separate general diaries with Bagerhat Police the same day, seeking security of their lives.

Death threat has been given for some of our recent reports against anarchists and hundi business, they have stated in general diaries.

Prayer Timings		
February 19		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fajr	5-30	6-00
Zohr	12-45	1-15
Asr	4-15	4-30
Maghrib	6-00	6-05
Esha	7-30	8-00
Source: Islamic Foundation		



PHOTO: STAR

Work on the overhead footbridge near Science Laboratory in the capital has resumed after a long suspension following a fatal accident, when part of the bridge crashed down on a passing car.

Coalition to start mass contacts to face AL

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The ruling alliance has decided to face the anti-government agitation including hartals politically and launch a mass contact programme soon.

Top leaders of the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh Jatiya Party (BJP) and Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) would start touring thana and district headquarters to hold meetings with party workers, public rallies and processions, sources said.

The decision was made to face Awami League's hartals and other programmes on one hand and to revive the parties' activities up to grassroots level on the other, they added.

Senior alliance leaders said a proposal to form a co-ordination committee of the alliance at the districts has been set aside fearing conflicts among the parties at the grassroots level.

BNP sources said the party would hold seven more big public meetings in the capital apart from regular public meetings in district and thana headquarters.

Prime Minister and BNP chief Khaleda Zia herself will be taking part in those meetings. Jamaat sources said a number of central leaders of the party are already now touring the districts and holding rallies to draw public support against the AL agitation.

BJP Chairman Nazir Rahman Manjur and Secretary General Kazi Firoz Rashid as well as other central leaders will visit Mymensingh and Khulna this month and hold public meetings there. More such tours are to follow in the in the months ahead, they added.

The two factions of the IOJ-- one led by Fazul Haq Amini MP and another by Azizul Haq -- are already holding public rallies and "waz

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Rab hits streets soon to quell AL agitation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), conceived to fight street crimes, will hit the streets shortly to quell the opposition's anti-govt agitation.

The government decided to put Rab into operation earlier than it had originally planned in the wake of the ongoing agitation including a series of shutdowns by the opposition, sources at the home ministry said yesterday.

But, other sources at the ministry said the elite anti-crime unit will not clamp down on hartal pickets or political demonstrators, instead it will seek those out who commit crimes behind the scene or instigate violence.

A policy planning (liaison) office for Rab has been set up at the home ministry to accelerate its institution and control it in the initial stage, the sources said. The over-5,000-

strong unit draws its members from the armed forces, police and ansars.

The government has appointed Anwarul Iqbal, additional inspector general of police (IGP), as the chief of Rab and an army colonel as his deputy. Earlier, a meeting on January 24 ended inconclusively over the issue of who should lead Rab.

The appointments to two other top posts, one to be filled up by an armed forces officer, will be made in a week, the sources added. High Rab officials are already at work at the liaison office.

Home ministry officials have been working for the last few days to clear the bureaucratic tangles holding back Rab from coming into being. They have been asked to complete the process at the earliest.

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Red Cross slams Israel barrier

BBC ONLINE

The International Committee of the Red Cross yesterday condemned Israel's building of a barrier in the West Bank as "contrary" to international law.

The aid agency said the barrier, whose proposed route cuts into Palestinian areas, went "far beyond what is permissible for an occupying power".

Israel says the barrier is designed to stop suicide bombers. But Palestinians dispute the

barrier's legality and say the wall is little more than a land grab.

The ICRC's comments come just days before a hearing at the International Court of Justice in The Hague on the legality of the controversial barrier.

Israel says the court does not have the authority to hold hearings on the barrier.

The ICRC, a neutral, Swiss-based organisation, has been observing construction of the security fence.

It says that, where the barrier runs through occupied territory, thousands of Palestinians have been deprived of access to water, health care and education.

It has also caused extensive damage to Palestinian land and property, the agency adds.

"The problems affecting the Palestinian population in their daily lives clearly demonstrate that it [the barrier] runs counter to Israel's obligation under [international humanitarian law] to ensure the humane treatment and well-being of

the civilian population living under its occupation," it said in a statement.

"The ICRC, therefore, calls upon Israel not to plan, construct or maintain this barrier within occupied territory."

The organisation stressed that it respected Israel's right to protect itself and the statement did not call for a halt to building altogether.

But BBC's Imogen Foulkes in

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