

Militants ambush Pak convoy, kill 12

AP, Wana
Attackers ambushed a Pakistani army convoy heading toward a counter-terrorism sweep against al-Qaeda militants near the Afghan border, killing at least 12 soldiers and wounding 15, officials said yesterday.

The attackers fired rockets that hit at least six army trucks in the ambush near Sarwakai, about 30 miles east of Wana, the main town of the South Waziristan tribal region.

Some of the trucks were carrying fuel and were destroyed by fire in the attack Monday, a government official in Sarwakai said on condition of anonymity.

Army spokesman Maj. Gen. Shaikat Sultan confirmed the attack and said army troops cordoned off the area to search for the assailants, but he declined to give more details.

At least 45 Pakistani troops are dead or missing since the bloodiest battle was unleashed a week ago

near the Afghan border, according to security officials.

Sixteen troops were killed, 22 injured and 12 taken hostage when a paramilitary unit was surprised on March 16, the first day of the ongoing battle, by a fierce onslaught from scores of well-armed fighters.

Meanwhile, tribal leaders made little headway in a bid to end a week of fierce clashes near Wana between thousands of Pakistani troops and hundreds of al-Qaeda militants and sympathetic members of the Yargul Khel tribe.

Tribal elders were meeting with local officials in Wana yesterday to discuss their next step, after the Yargul Khel tribe had sought more time to discuss government demands, said Brig Mahmood Shah, chief of security for the region.

Pakistani officials said Monday they discovered a mile-long tunnel leading from a besieged mud fortress that could have offered an escape route for top al-Qaeda

suspects at the start of the operation.

President Gen Pervez Musharraf said last Thursday that a "high-value" target was likely at the site. Some senior Pakistani officials have told The Associated Press that they believe al-Qaeda No. 2 Ayman al-Zawahiri may have been there, though the government has repeatedly said it does not know who is inside.

The Pakistani military imposed a 20-square-mile cordon to seal the area of the fighting, and say they are confident nobody has escaped.

But the cordon was not in place at the start of the operation on March 16, when Pakistani forces were going to arrest local tribesmen were surprised by a ferocious barrage from within the compound walls. Fifteen soldiers and 26 militants died in the initial assault. The military sent in thousands of reinforcements over the following two days.

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Cash, goods looted from electronics shop in Motijheel

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Burglars looted cash and other valuables reportedly worth Tk 27.6 lakh from an electronics shop at Motijheel after it was closed Monday night.

Shop owner Abu Saker yesterday went to open Al Faruq Electronics at 10:00am with other staff only to discover a new lock hanging on the gate of the shop.

Breaking open the gate, they found Tk 4.10 lakh, 225 mobile phone sets, 220 prepaid cell phone cards and 20 SIM (Subscriber Identification Module) cards were missing from the shop.

Robbers might have looted the ground floor shop at Lal Bhaban sometime between 9:00pm on Monday and 10:00am yesterday, police said quoting the shop owner as saying.

A case was lodged with Motijheel Police Station. Police failed to nab anyone till 7:00 last evening.



PHOTO: STAR

Empty phone boxes lie scattered on the floor after robbers looted a mobile phone store at the city's Stadium Market yesterday.

BAIL FIX ALLEGATION

Govt reluctant to act against judge

STAR REPORT

The government is apparently unwilling to take action against a High Court judge for misconduct, as the law ministry did not send the Prime Minister's Office a presidential note on the Supreme Judicial Council's January 26 verdict report.

A ministry official yesterday hinted that any decision on action against Additional Judge Syed Shahidur Rahman would be taken after the Supreme Court Bar Association elections scheduled for March 28-29, as the bail-fix allegation against him has a strong sway over voters.

The government does not want SC Bar Association President Barrister Rokanuddin Mahmud, who made the allegation public, to use the issue in moulding opinions in his favour, he said, asking not to be named. Rokanuddin will contest the polls as a president candidate.

The government fears Rokanuddin with strong links to

the opposition will highlight the allegation as a flaw of the ruling coalition that appointed Shahidur as additional judge despite the Bar's objection, a source said.

"If Shahidur is removed from office now, it will strike a big blow to the coalition-allied lawyers," he said.

The council in its report says it has not been proved beyond doubt to convict the judge of taking bribes in the bail fix, but "on consideration of its entirety, it cannot be said that the allegations are not supported by evidence nor can it be said the allegations are baseless".

The council's in its view that he should no longer hold the post because of circumstantial evidence.

The policymakers are divided on probable steps against Shahidur, accused of taking bribes from a litigant, Nasima Sultana Kona,

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PHOTO: STAR

A huge chunk of land on the bank of Buriganga over by the bridge at Kamrangirchar is demarcated with bamboo poles as part of the encroachment spree that has all but gobbled up the river.

Dhaka-Joydevpur direct train link disrupted for 12 hours

UNB, Dhaka

Direct train communication between Dhaka and Joydevpur was disrupted for more than 12 hours after a pillar of a railway bridge on the track collapsed Monday night.

Railway officials said the pillar of bridge no 50 between Tongi and Dhurashram stations collapsed at 9:00pm during renovation work on the bridge.

The renovation was being carried on to change the metre gauge line into mixed gauge, they said.

However, train services on the route were kept in operation through trans-shipment of passengers till the pillar was restored at 10:30am yesterday.

The Additional Chief Engineer of Bangladesh Railway has been assigned to probe the causes behind the collapse of the pillar. He will submit a report within a week.

Bomb injures 7-year-old girl in Sutrapur

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A seven-year-old girl was wounded by a bomb blast at Loharpul in Sytrapur yesterday.

According to sources, unidentified criminals threw the bomb near Shukila, daughter of day-labourer Samar Ali, at about 3:30pm when she was playing before their SK Das Lane house.

Hasna Begum, a neighbour, admitted her to Dhaka Medical College Hospital with injuries in the leg, they added.

Youngest of four children, Shukila was alone in their home as her mother, a domestic help, and father went out to work.

Villagers block Dhaka-Ctg Rd protesting robbery

UNB, Comilla

Villagers put up a barricade on the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway at Chitura in Chowddagram upazila yesterday demanding the arrest of robbers who looted

five houses at Charpara and Dimatali villages in the upazila on Monday night.

Hundreds of vehicles remained stranded on the highway as traffic came to a halt for about two and a half hours from 8:30am.

The villagers removed barricade after the officer-in-charge of Chowddagram Police Station assured them of rounding up the robbers.

Later, the angry villagers staged a protest rally in front of the Chiura T&T office. The additional police superintendent, assistant police superintendent and chairman addressed the rally.

China halts HR talks with US

Rights group welcomes anti-China resolution

AFP, Beijing

China suspended its human rights dialogue with the United States yesterday following Washington's decision to seek a resolution condemning its human rights record at a key UN meeting in Geneva.

"The confrontation incited by the American side has damaged the foundation for the human rights dialogue and exchanges between the two countries," Assistant Foreign Minister Shen Guofang said in a foreign ministry statement.

"The Chinese side must immediately halt the human rights dialogue and exchanges. The American side should be held responsible for all consequences that are caused."

The United States announced Monday it would seek a resolution condemning China for alleged human rights abuses and accused Beijing of not living up to its international commitments to protect the rights of its citizens.

The US ambassador to Beijing, Clark T. Randt, was summoned earlier Tuesday for a dressing down by Shen.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Kong Quan slammed the

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INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

WB plans soft loan scheme for banks

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

The World Bank (WB) is pushing ahead with a scheme to encourage and facilitate the commercial banks in offering soft loans to private-sector entrepreneurs for undertaking infrastructure development projects.

The WB in a meeting at its country office yesterday explained the concept to Bangladesh Association of Bankers (BAB) through a presentation titled 'Private Finance for Infrastructure in Bangladesh'. The chief and deputy chief executives of banks that participated in the

meeting responded positively to the plan that comes with a substantial financial package.

According to the proposal, the commercial banks will offer loans to private sector infrastructure developers in power, transportation, water and sanitation, solid waste management, education, health, security etc across the country at simple and low interest rate. If the development projects require import of anything using foreign currency, the WB will provide lending for that part from a fund titled 'Private Sector Infrastructure Development Project' that it will create under its

soft-loan wing -- International Development Assistance (IDA). The WB sought feedback from the bankers present to help it design the exact utilisation of the fund.

Presenting the plan to the BAB, WB Lead Financial Sector Specialist Christopher Juan Costain said previously the WB funded only public-sector infrastructure development programmes. But, the public sector has failed to perform up to the mark due to its lack of transparency, leading to corruption and wastage, he remarked.

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17 women burnt by acid last week

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 17 women including a nine-month old child were severely burnt by acid thrown at them, while two succumbed to the injuries, over the last one week across the country, Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) said yesterday.

Failing to pay dowry, refusals to marry and land dispute were reported to be the reasons behind those incidents that took place

between March 15 and March 21, said Monira Rahman, the executive director of ASF at a press conference at ASF hospital building yesterday.

Of the victims, Khaleda Begum, 16 of Sylhet breathed her last on Monday midnight at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) after fighting her life for 15 days since March 8. Another girl Shahnaj, 20 of Manikganj, died on March 14.

While describing the terrible ordeal of a victim, who is now undergoing treatment at Jibon Tara, a hospital run by ASF at Banani in the city, Monira said, "It is unimaginable how human beings could be so cruel as to throw acid into one's private parts after gang raping and chopping many parts of the body."

Sima, the nine-month old child, SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

Prayer Timings		
March 24		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fair	4-55	5-
30 Zohr	12-45	1-15
Asr	4-45	5-00
Maghrib	6-16	6-20
Esha	7-45	8-15

Source: Islamic Foundation