

Clashes erupt in Baghdad, US offers truce in Falluja

2 US troops, civilians missing; 6 foreigners 'seized'

REUTERS, Baghdad

Street fighting erupted in Baghdad yesterday as youths with rifles and grenade launchers battled US troops in a Sunni Muslim area, witnesses said.

Dozens of gunmen, their faces masked with Arab headdresses, shot at US troops from alleyways in the staunchly Sunni district of Adhimiya in northwestern Baghdad.

The Pentagon said two US soldiers and an unknown number of civilian contractors were missing after an attack on a military fuel convoy in Abu Ghraib, just west of Baghdad, on Friday.

A Reuters journalist saw two captive foreigners, one of them wounded, in a mosque in a village in

the Abu Ghraib district. Gunmen holding them said they were Italian. The official was quoted as saying that it was not immediately known if the missing Americans had been captured and that a search had been launched.

Iraqi insurgents meanwhile said they had seized four Italians and two Americans on the western outskirts of Baghdad Friday but Italy said all Italians registered in Iraq were accounted for.

The US military offered a new ceasefire deal in the Sunni town of Falluja, west of Baghdad, after nearly a week of fighting that has killed hundreds of people.

"Coalition forces are prepared to implement a cease-fire with enemy elements in Falluja commencing at

noon today," Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt told a news conference.

"At this point it's an aspiration. We are hoping to use this press conference...to get this message to the enemy," he said.

Witnesses said fresh clashes had erupted in Falluja despite a unilateral cease-fire declared by the Americans on Friday.

In other attacks, Reuters television film showed a blazing truck that witnesses said had been hit by a roadside bomb aimed at a US convoy on the airport road. A Reuters photographer saw a burning tank on a highway leading west from Baghdad.

More than a million Shias were set to mark the holy day of Arbain in

the shrine city of Kerbala on Saturday, prompting fears among US officials of more chaos and bloodshed.

Arbain, beginning on Saturday night and continuing through Sunday, comes 40 days after the religious period of Ashura, when suicide bombers in Baghdad and Kerbala killed 171 people.

The US truce offer came after Iraqi politicians demanded a halt to the worst fighting since Saddam Hussein's fall.

A statement by the US-installed Governing Council criticised "military solutions and the policy of collective punishment that has fallen on innocent civilians." It demanded "an immediate

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

Polls only after govt serves out term, says PM



Prime Minister Khaleda Zia addresses a rally on the Physical Training College ground in Mohammadpur yesterday.



STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday rejected outright main opposition Awami League's (AL's) demand for mid-term polls, saying elections would be held only after the present government served out its term.

"People voted the four-party alliance into office for five years and you (Sheikh Hasina) have to wait until 2007 for fresh polls," Khaleda, also chairperson of ruling coalition leader BNP, said in a speech to a huge public rally at the Physical Training College in Mohammadpur.

She said the opposition were trying to capture power beyond constitutional means, adding people would resist their evil designs.

Without referring to AL's April 30 deadline for unseating her government, the premier asked the opposition to shun what she said was the

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

BNP, AL face-off over Hawa Bhaban siege plan

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and main opposition Awami League (AL) are heading for a street showdown over the opposition programme of laying siege to the Hawa Bhaban on April 21.

The government is planning to bar the opposition from staging the siege, while the main opposition has asked its front organisations to make the programme successful by any means.

The BNP yesterday declared a counter-programme on April 21 in Gulshan, where the Hawa Bhaban is set, and warned of laying siege to Sudha Sadan, the residence of Leader of the Opposition in parlia-

ment Sheikh Hasina, if the AL did not withdraw its programme.

The Hawa Bhaban has been at the centre of controversy since the BNP and its allies came to power, with widespread allegations of corruption and abuse of the government power levelled against the office of the BNP chairperson, which has already been dubbed as alternative power centre within the government.

This is for the first time ever that an opposition party has declared to lay siege to another political party's office.

The civil society and media alongside the opposition political parties have long been demanding

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

AL parliamentary team alleges Ctg administration's non-cooperation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A parliamentary delegation of the main opposition Awami League (AL) probing the recent largest ever arms seizure in Chittagong yesterday accused the government of non-cooperation in its investigation.

The deputy commissioner and the superintendent of police of the prime port city avoided the seven-member delegation led by Deputy Leader of the Opposition Abdul Hamid.

"The government does not want to probe the gunrunning as its high-ups are involved in it. It has directed the local administration not to help the opposition parliamentary team," Hamid told The Daily Star by telephone after reaching the city earlier in the day.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

Man pushed out of bus to death

Students burn 3 vehicles, block road

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A young man was pushed out of a running bus to his death on Begum Rokeya Sarani in Dhaka yesterday, prompting students of the nearby Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University to set fire to three buses, damage six and barricade the busy thoroughfare for two hours.

The victim, Akram Hossain, 22, hailed from Mymensingh. Son of late Altamash Ali, Akram did his honours in accounting and came to the capital to look for a job a few days ago.

Witnesses said Akram boarded the Mirpur-bound bus from Farm Gate at around 1:30pm on his way

SEE PAGE 11 COL 8

Listed criminal's arches for PM

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Supporters of listed criminal Pichchi Helal erected two arches in Mohammadpur to welcome Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to yesterday's BNP meeting at Mohammadpur Physical Training College.

Many leaders of local BNP and its front organisations erected over 50 arches and hung hundreds of banners on the stretches of the roads leading to the venue in violation of a prime ministerial prohibition.

But the two arches drew public

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

Interns to get higher pay, more instts to come under MPO

Saifur commits at pre-budget meet

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government, in next year's budget, will insert some popular steps, like enlarging primary school stipend net and amount, increasing interns' salary and introducing second shifts at technical education

centres. Besides, a number of private schools and colleges will get government support that comes in the form of monthly payment order (MPO).

At the first inter-ministerial

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

Dhaka to send troops to Iraq after power transfer: Mahub

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh is likely to send troops to war-torn Iraq after power in Baghdad is handed over to the local leadership, a key official said.

"Bangladesh will stick to its earlier stand and may send troops to the war-ravaged country if there is any request from the UN," Prime Minister's Defence Adviser Mahubur Rahman told the Daily Star yesterday.

Dhaka can send troops to Iraq even without the request of the UN if the 'occupying forces' leave Iraq and hand over power to an Iraqi government and if the new administration

SEE PAGE 11 COL 5

Student strike tomorrow

DU CORRESPONDENT

Different student organisations are going on strike at all educational institutions tomorrow demanding immediate arrest and punishment of Jamaat-e-Islami lawmaker Delwar Hossain Saidee for inciting the February 27-attack on eminent writer Humayun Azad.

Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the main opposition Awami League's (AL) student wing, along with Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD)-backed Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Bangladesh Chhatra Moitri (BCM) called the strike.

Leaders of the striking organisations yesterday urged the student community to make the strike a success.

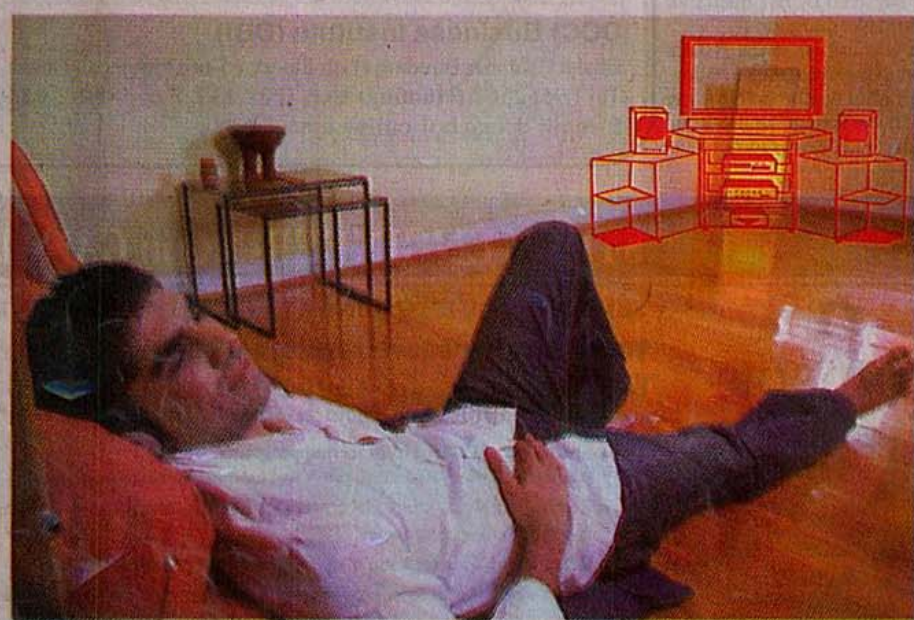
Biman rejoinder

Biman Bangladesh Airlines in a rejoinder on a news item headlined 'Biman to buy backup engine for old F28s' published in The Daily Star on April 8 said the procurement of backup engine has nothing to do with the procurement of two additional F28 aircraft.

It said Biman has only one spare engine for its fleet of three F28s which is not sufficient. "The procurement of engine for F28 was planned in 2002 to meet the shortfall. Due to the shortfall Biman had to hire engines at high cost on several occasions to keep the fleet operational," it said.

About the quoted price of its own F28 in a tender in 2003, Biman said it

SEE PAGE 11 COL 6



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