

New threat made to Japanese hostages

REUTERS, Dubai

The three Japanese prisoners being held hostage by guerrillas in Iraq will be killed within 24 hours, according to a man claiming to have visited the group.

A man described as Muzhir al-Duleimi, head of the League for the Defence of the Rights of the Iraqi People, told a correspondent for Al Jazeera station in Baghdad yesterday that previous reports that the hostage-takers were about to free the Japanese had been untrue.

"This morning we visited the fighters and we discovered that everything reported yesterday is absolutely not true and the resistance leadership said it would not release the hostages," said Duleimi, whose group is previously unknown.

It was not clear when the 24-hour deadline would expire.

On Thursday, the militants issued a videotape showing them holding knives to the throats of the

blindfolded prisoners and threatened to burn them alive unless Japanese troops were pulled out of Iraq in three days.

Duleimi said he had not personally seen the hostages on Sunday.

"I made an effort to save them today but the resistance said I had only 24 hours and gave me this statement... which says the (Japanese) vice foreign minister should visit Falluja to see the mass graves and massacres committed by American forces," he said.

"The Japanese government should apologise to the Iraqi people and withdraw forces from Iraq and they have 24 hours after which the first hostage will be killed and 12 hours later the rest of them will be killed."

Japan's Senior Vice Foreign Minister Ichiro Aisawa is in Amman, Jordan to deal with the hostage crisis. A Japanese government official said officials were checking the Al Jazeera report.

Robots seen as companions for elderly

AP, Ohbu, Japan

To some scientists, robots are the answer to caring for aging societies in Japan and other nations where the young are destined to be overwhelmed by a surging elderly population.

In one of a budding series of robot-therapy sessions at Japanese hospitals and senior citizens' homes, the elderly patients suffer from severe dementia, but their faces light up when they see the dog-shaped robot, swaddled in soft clothing, waddle around the hospital floor. Some clap; others break into

feeble smiles. Urged by nurses, a few cautiously reach out and touch it.

"It's cute," one female patient cries out.

Advocates see robots serving not just as helpers carrying out simple chores and reminding patients to take their medication but also as companions, even if the machines can carry on only a semblance of a real dialogue.

The ideal results: huge savings in medical costs, reduced burdens on family and caretakers, and old and sick people kept in better health.

Govt extends Block 9

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"Some local political leaders wanted to squeeze out as much money as possible from the explorers whenever a drilling spot was selected," alleged a source.

Chevron-Texaco last year announced sale of its shares to Niko Resources, a company that was disqualified in the bidding. Tullow initially rejected this sale-out and Petrobangla questioned the legality in the changeover. The share transfer is now awaiting the government's approval.

Block 9 operator Tullow is now drilling a well at Lalmai, a spot where world oil giant Shell drilled an exploratory well in the late fifties without any success.

Tullow and Chevron-Texaco experts are hopeful of striking gas there as new technologies allow them to obtain more information than in the late fifties.

The oil companies will drill a third well in Bangora near Srikail area by

the Gumti River before the fresh extension ends on August 5, sources said.

Meanwhile, a Petrobangla high official played down the exploration result so far saying, "In the world of exploration this kind of failure is only natural."

The standard ratio for striking gas is 10:1 that is one discovery out of 10 drilled wells, he said. "But we have an amazing 3:1 record. No one should feel too disappointed seeing no gas in the first attempt at Kashimpur."

"If they are successful, they will get another 4-year extension during which time they will have to drill 10 more wells," he said.

Niko will become the operator instead of Tullow by that time, said a source. "But, Niko will have to furnish a guarantee from a big and reputed oil company that it is capable of drilling these wells to become operator."

KEPZ chief bullet-hit

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Muradpur in the prime port city.

KILLING OF BABUL

Witnesses said five attackers way-laid the autorickshaw a few minutes after Babul and three of his colleagues hired in front of their Agrabad Access Road office at about 2:30pm.

One of the gunmen sent a single bullet into the head of Babul who was carrying the bag that contained the sale proceeds of the day, killing him instantly.

The killers also fired a few shots into the air to scare people on the bustling road and made a quick getaway.

Police on the patrol nearby retrieved his body, but could not arrest anyone.

ATTACK ON KEPZ CHIEF

Police and witnesses said the attackers burst into the microbus of Rabbani on the way to the KEPZ site across the Karnaphuli river and looted the cash and other belongings of Rabbani and his colleagues before opening fire.

A bullet pierced through the throat of Rabbani, also a former chairman of Chittagong port and ex-director general of shipping, leaving him critically injured.

The assailants stopped the microbus he and his colleagues from the KEPZ, a sister concern of Korean conglomerate Youngone Corporation Ltd, was riding on, putting up a barricade at Muradpur.

Rabbani, also a former navy commodore, was rushed to Chittagong Medical College Hospital and shifted to the Combined Military Hospital in Dhaka by a Cessna aircraft of KEPZ that he joined on January 1.

POLICE TIGHT-LIPPED

Police said five people were arrested on charge of attacking the

vehicle, but the motives for the crime appeared hazy.

Asked on the attack, Zia Hossain, adviser of Youngone, said: "We don't understand why such an attempt came on his life."

A top officer of Chittagong Metropolitan Police (CMP) said he got some important leads to the attack, but declined to reveal them 'in the interest of investigation'.

"We got some important clues to the attack, but we won't leak them for the sake of investigation at the moment," said Meah Luthfur Rahman Chowdhury, deputy commissioner (north) of the CMP.

Other police officers linked the attack to internal conflict in the KEPZ over the termination of former executive director Abu Naser Chowdhury.

"We will quiz Naser as his name figured on the list of suspects," Luthfur said.

But Naser denied his hand in the criminal act, saying he ran a feud with the KEPZ authorities, not with any individual.

He said he was fighting a legal battle with the authorities over the termination and pointing a finger at him meant some people wanted to frame him in criminal cases grabbing the opportunity.

Tension ran high in the port city, reeling from a wave of ransom-motivated kidnappings and the largest ever arms seizure on April 2, after the crimes amid beefed-up security.

Security of the southeastern city was stepped up after the seizure of 10 truckloads of sophisticated weapons including rockets, rocket launchers, submachine guns, grenades, AK-47 rifles and bullets.

Bikalpa Dhara to be floated at another date

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The alternative political stream of former president AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury will try another date as it missed yesterday as scheduled earlier to launch its political party styled as Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh.

Denial of permission to use city's Paltan Maidan as the venue was the reason for the delay, Bikalpa Dhara sources said.

On March 25, the alternative political stream announced March 11 as the date for formally floating its political party.

The next date might be between April 18 and 25, said Bikalpa Dhara sources yesterday.

Bikalpa Dhara, which had been facing obstructions by the government fight from the beginning, has by this time managed to announce a national convening committee and formed a student wing named Bangladesh Chhatra Dhara.

Meanwhile, Bikalpa Dhara is planning a 'Balloon Release' programme next week denouncing the misuse of the ruling coalition. It plans that people from their households in the city would release special balloons in the sky on a scheduled time to show 'no confidence' to the government.

Security scurry

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On the deadline set by Awami League for his government's resignation, the state minister said, "April 30 isn't a big concern to us and I don't have much time to think about it."

Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Commissioner Ashraf Huda, who also attended the meeting, said all out security measures had already been taken and metal detectors were set at the entrance of Ramna Park, the most popular and traditional venue of the New Year celebrations.

"Rab, both in uniform and plain-clothes, will be deployed during the celebrations," Ashraf said. He sought cooperation of the citizens to help keep the festivities peaceful.

"We've selected 40 points in Ramna and the university area where plainclothes and uniformed police are already posted to check any disturbances," the commissioner said, adding the force was specifically directed to be polite with people so that the festive mood should prevail.

Home Secretary Omar Farooq also confirmed that steps for a peaceful observance of the New Year have been taken.

On the April 2 arms haul in Chittagong by the five-member probe committee headed by him, Farooq declined to say anything.

"I won't disclose anything at this moment about the outcome of the investigations," he said, adding the press would be informed at the appropriate time.

And when will that be for the government to make the report public? In answer to that the home secretary told the press, "Sooner or later. We'll get back to you when we come to a conclusion."

Yesterday's meeting also recommended rewarding three policemen for their outstanding performance. They are Abul Kalam Azad of Sutrapur Police Station and traffic sergeants Harunur Rashid and Mostafa Ali for recovering firearms.

157 structures

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New structures, however, have already sprouted on the recovered land, but a high BIWTA official said the erection of the fresh structures were an isolated incident, which has not been on a large scale. He also said it impossible for the BIWTA to keep a round-the-clock watch to ward off fresh encroachment as they are running short on manpower.

"We have a land dispute with neighbour Rab Bhuiyan for 10 years. He has been threatening for

Strike

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Many of the English medium educational institutions in the city, meanwhile, have suspended classes anticipating violence.

The AL-backed BCL and JSD-backed BCL yesterday brought out separate processions and held rallies on the Dhaka University campus to press for their common demand for arrest and punishment of Saidee.

The AL's student front also protested the death threat to Prof AAMS Arefin Siddique, president of Dhaka University Teachers Association.

BCL President Liaquat Sikder said told the rally the alliance government is trying to protect Saidee when Azad himself has blamed the Jamaat lawmaker for the attack on him. But, the government is yet to take any steps.

BCL General Secretary Nazrul Islam Babu urged the students to make the strike a success.

The JSD's student wing demanded a ban on religion-based politics, distortion of history, a uniform education system and resignation of the 'failed' BNP-Jamaat alliance government. Its leaders also urged the students to make stage today's strike in all educational institutions. BCL President Shariful Kabir Swapan and General Secretary Ali Hasan Tarun spoke, among others.

Secrets of how cells die revealed

BBC ONLINE

Scientists have taken an important step towards understanding the biological processes involved when cells die.

A medical research team hopes the work will eventually lead to new treatment for a range of diseases, including cancer.

They believe it should be possible to manipulate the complex interactions within a cell that lead to its death - and which often go wrong in disease.

The research is published in the journal Molecular Cell.

The challenge now is to use this knowledge to work towards finding new drugs and treatments for the many common diseases and conditions which occur when cell death goes wrong.

Cells in the human body are continually dying and most of these cells kill themselves by a programmed form of cell death, known as apoptosis.

In a healthy body, the number of cells stays constant. Millions of new cells are produced every second, and millions of others are lost or kill themselves.

Failure of the normal apoptosis process plays a role in different diseases including cancer, certain neurodegenerative disorders such as Parkinson's and auto-immune diseases, such as lupus.

Previous research has shown that the life cycle of a cell is regulated by a complex cellular machine called the proteasome.

This works by controlling the delicate balance of proteins in a cell. Proteins which are no longer needed are tagged, and targeted for destruction by the proteasome.

However, during apoptosis, the part of the proteasome which is able to spot the tags is effectively disabled by the release of enzymes called caspases.

This allows for the build up of proteins within the cell which can ultimately trigger its death.

The Leicester team hope that pinpointing this procedure will enable scientists to find ways to manipulate it to treat disease.

For instance, amplifying the apoptosis process could potentially stop cancer, which often results from a failure of cells to die off at the end of their natural life.

Lead researcher Professor Gerald Cohen, who is based at Leicester University, said: "This new research takes us a step closer to understanding how cells die.

"The challenge now is to use this knowledge to work towards finding new drugs and treatments for the many common diseases and conditions which occur when cell death goes wrong."

Dr Julie Sharp, science information manager at Cancer Research UK, said: "In the future scientists may be able to use this information to design treatments that switch cell death back on, stopping cancer cells in their tracks."

Linda Kelly, chief executive of the Parkinson's Disease Society, said: "The society welcomes this new advance which will take us closer to understanding why cells die.

"We look forward to future work in this important area of research."

MINE BLAST

Hope dims as Russian toll hits 40

REUTERS, Osinniki, Russia

The death toll from a gas blast at a Siberian colliery has risen to 40 while hopes for the survival of seven more missing miners dim as rescuers dig with their bare hands to reach them.

The explosion tore through the Taizhina mine in the Kemerovo district early on Saturday.

"There are 40 dead," Federal Energy Agency head Sergei Oganesyan told reporters. "Seven are still unaccounted for... It's most likely we will just find their bodies."

Raped, acid-burnt

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encouraged her to take to household works.

She spent nearly a year in virtual confinement in her father's house in Char Arkalmi village learning how to be a good housewife and it was decided in November last that she would be sent to her husband's house in a week.

Destiny had other plans for her, though. At the stroke of 1:00am on November 27 last year, 10 to 12 youths stormed into her room. She was all alone as her parents were staying somewhere else.

"Awakened by the noise, I discovered myself surrounded by the youths," the girl recalled the harrowing event, trying to fight back tears: "I begged them, but they just won't listen to me."

"Our neighbour Abdur Rab Bhuiyan's grandson Fakhru'l Bhuiyan and his friend Shahabuddin Sabur raped me while the others held me tight," she said, strangling a sob.

Fakhru'l's friends Kalam Patwari and Farid poured acid on her from bottles as she was groaning in pain. Hearing her cry, her neighbours rushed her to Charfassion Thana Health Complex with her face, throat, breasts, hands and thighs severely burnt. Officials of Acid Survivors Foundation brought her to the capital the following day for better treatment.

"We have a land dispute with neighbour Rab Bhuiyan for 10 years. He has been threatening for

Chief whip

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on law, justice and parliamentary affairs ministry, was quoted as telling a committee meeting at the Sangsad Bhavan.

The Jatiya Party (JP) of HM Ershad, the second largest opposition party in parliament, attended an invitation of the committee.

JP lawmakers echoed Delwar's view, but Law Minister Moudud Ahmed defended the proposed bill saying: "We have two-thirds majority and we want to make a constitutional provision for it, so nobody can change it in future."

JP lawmaker Golam Mohammad Quader said: "The government should not play on the power of absolute majority in making the portrait provision constitutionally mandatory."

The bill placed in parliament on March 17 also reserves 45 seats for women in parliament without direct elections to them - a proposal that drew flak from women's rights groups demanding direct polls.

The Jatiya Sangsad committee began scrutinising the bill on March 25 amid boycott of the rejected committee's second invitation to a discussion on the constitution amendment bill.

Khandaker Mahub Uddin Ahmed, chairman of the committee, asked for elaboration of the provision whether the portrait of the president would be displayed at the Prime Minister's Office.

The parliamentary body also

long to ruin us and drive us away," said the victim's mother, alleging that Rab masterminded the rape.

Her father's lodging case with the police proved to be of little help, instead it brought more trouble for the family.

"In connivance with the accused, Officer-in-Charge of Charfassion Police Station Abdur Razzak submitted a final report saying the charges were false and filed defamation charges against the victim's father," Sub-Inspector Enamul Haq of CID Jhalokathi camp, who was tasked with the probe, said. "Dr Mustafizur Rahman, medical officer of the thana health complex, falsely reported that the victim had fled the hospital," Enamul added.

"I launched an investigation on March 7, found the charges true and arrested Fakhru'l Bhuiyan and Kalam Patwari on March 31," said Enamul. He admitted the girl to One-stop Crisis Centre at the DMCH for test at 3:45pm Thursday.

The victim's father, meanwhile, was coming to Dhaka to see his daughter on April 3 morning when Fakhru'l's brother Nirab Bhuiyan and some others got hold of him at Sadarghat, beat him up and turned him over to Kotwali police branding him as a criminal. Police produced him before court, which sent him to jail the same day. He was released on bail Thursday.

discussed the provision of elections to local government bodies in 90 days after expiry of their tenures and allowing public servants to run the organisations for the interim period.

GM Quader rejected the provision that figures on the list of six changes in the amendment bill and told reporters: "Allowing public servants to hold the posts in the local government bodies violates the constitution."

Defending the provision, the law minister said it was proposed to remove the logjam of cases over elections to local bodies. The committee chairman in apparent confusion about the provision said: "The proposal says the elections to local bodies will be held in 90 days. If it is not possible just in case, what will be the next course of action?"

"The committee asked the ministry to detail the provision at its next meeting," he told the newspersons.

Railway

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Railway officials said Tk 788 crore has been allocated for the sector in the current fiscal year's development budget.

The railway authority incurred a loss of around Tk 100 crore last fiscal. "We're trying to overcome the inherent bottlenecks and reduce the losses," said Mustafizur Rahman, director general of the BR.

Jailil terms PM's Saturday speech unbalanced

UNB, Dhaka

Awami League General Secretary Abdul Jailil yesterday termed Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's Saturday's speech in a public meeting as unbalanced remarks.

"Such statement indicating the constitutional process does not suit the chairperson of BNP," which, he alleged, had assumed power brandishing guns and formed the party using military and civil administration and money from the public exchequer.

In a statement, Jailil said Awami League does not believe in unconstitutional and undemocratic acts, and is demanding resignation of the government and mid-term election as recognised by the constitution.

"Election of a government for five years does not mean the people have given it the right to resort to rampant corruption, killings and terrorism," he said.

Jailil said it is the constitutional and democratic right of the people to hold rallies and meetings, to show no-confidence and demand resignation and mid-term polls, protesting "misdeeds" of the government.

The Awami League, he said, was carrying out movement in a constitutionally recognised democratic way demanding resignation of the "fascist" government to pave the way for mid-term elections.

Rejecting the prime minister's allegation about terrorism and development against Awami League, Jailil said the previous Awami League government, through governance, had built up Bangladesh as a self-respecting country with potential.

But the present government instead of taking any development projects in last two-and-half years had instead stopped the projects taken up by the AL government, he alleged.

The Awami League general secretary advised the prime minister to quit power showing "respect to the popular demand for mid-term elections"

"Otherwise, the government will have to face a tragic end in the face of public wrath," he warned.

Masked men

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they would stage a demonstration, to be decided at a meeting today, demanding arrest of the killers.

In Badda, five gunmen shot and killed an accused in a murder case and wounded a boy at around 7:30am when the former was on his way to appear before a court in the city.

Khalilur Rahman Khalil, 26, an accused in the murder case of Kalu of Karail in Badda in 2002, died on the spot fronting seven bullets in the head, throat, chest, legs and hands.

Twelve-year-old Sohel, who was hit by a bullet in the right thigh during the shooting, is undergoing treatment at the DMCH.

"Five criminals surrounded Khalil and three of his relatives accompanying him in front of Khanbagh Girls High School in north Badda, some 200 yards from their house, and fired at random at Khalil," said Sohel who was standing close by.

The victim's mother, Fatema Begum, said people of Kalu who was murdered in 2002 have killed her son. She also said Khalil moved to north Badda from his Karail house two months ago fearing backlash from Kalu's men.

In the other incident, a mob caught one of the four alleged muggers and gouged out his right eye when the gang went to Al Amin Rice Mill near Mirpur Circle 10 at around 11:00am to collect tolls.

Local people chased the gang and caught the unidentified male aged about 25 after the mill workers shouted for help. He is being treated at the DMCH.

ISPR dismisses

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Saturday claimed that the huge weapons hauled recently in the port city were sent by the US and Pakistan for arming Indian rebels who run 50 to 60 camps in the CHT. He also alleged some members of Indian separatist outfits were being trained in those camps.

The Bangladesh government is fully committed to not allowing its land for use by any separatist outfits of the neighbouring countries including India, the release added.

The ISPR asked the mayor to provide information on those camps to the army, which will help trace the camps.

FOREIGN MINISTRY, US EMBASSY REBUT CLAIM
The foreign ministry and the US Embassy in Dhaka yesterday also rejected as baseless Mohiuddin's allegations, according to UNB news agency.

A foreign ministry spokesman dismissed these allegations as "false, misleading and irresponsible." He said the matter is under close scrutiny of a high-powered government inquiry team.

"Loose and baseless speculations would only compromise the search for the truth," the agency quoted him as saying.

Such an allegation about the involvement of friendly countries "must be seen as a figment of his (mayor's) imagination", he said.

The US Embassy also laughed off the allegation. "It is absolutely baseless," an embassy source told the agency, without elaboration.

Sporadic battles

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Grabbing their chance, desperate families fled battle zones in the town of 300,000. Sunni Muslim fighters, who have been battling US Marines from street to street, remained inside.

In Baghdad, witnesses said US troops used tanks to smash their way into the compound of a Sunni mosque and Koranic school in a night raid on the Adhamiya district, where teenage gunmen fought running street battles with the Americans on Saturday.

FOOTAGE SHOWS WESTERN BODIES

Video footage aired on Arabic television yesterday showed the bodies of two dead Westerners - apparently a pair of Americans seen by APTN cameramen on Friday being dragged out of a car on the Abu Ghraib highway, in a different incident from Hammill's kidnapping.

The cameramen fled the scene Friday, and the fate of the two men was unknown. But one of the bodies in Sunday's footage resembled one of the Americans taken out of the car.

The new footage showed the bodies surrounded by gunmen, who are heard on the tape saying the two are American intelligence officers.

One of the bodies lay sprawled on the pavement, his face bloodied and his right leg drenched in blood. The other body had been rolled face down, his shirt lifted to reveal a