

US officials, civic leaders agree Falluja peace plan

REUTERS, Baghdad

U.S. officials and civic leaders of Falluja yesterday agreed a plan to bring peace back to the bloodied Iraqi city after two weeks of heavy fighting in which hundreds of Iraqis died.

And, on a relatively peaceful day, the commander of 2,500 U.S. troops outside Najaf said he would allow time for talks before any attempt to enter the holy city to seize a rebel cleric — which could spark a wider and bloodier uprising.

The Shi'ite cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, called for a halt to attacks on Spain's 1,400 troops near Najaf after the new government in Madrid said it was pulling out of the U.S.-led occupying coalition.

"The attacks on Spanish troops should be stopped since they are returning to their country and as long as they don't carry out aggressions against the Iraqi people," said a statement from Sadr's office in the southern city.

Dan Senor, chief spokesman of the U.S.-led authority, told a news conference that negotiators agreed after three days of talks to work toward a real and lasting cease-fire in Falluja.

However, it is not clear how much influence Falluja officials have on the estimated 1,000-2,000 fighters in the city who have battled on despite U.S. Marines being ordered to halt offensive operations 10 days ago.

"The parties agreed that coalition forces do not intend to resume offensive operations if the persons in the city turn in their heavy weapons," Senor said.

Iraqi police and U.S. troops would start joint patrols in the city to try and restore order, he said.

U.S. forces launched a crackdown in Falluja after a spate of violence including the killing and mutilation of four U.S. contractors in the town on March 31. They encircled it and vowed to capture those responsible for that crime.

Senor said that once found they would be dealt with by the Iraqi justice system.

A curfew would start two hours later at 9 p.m. There would be unfettered access to Falluja hospital, food and medicine would be provided to isolated areas and ambulances would be allowed to move freely, he said.

"WE CAN WAIT"

On the other front, where coalition troops around Najaf have been fighting Sadr's Mehdi Army, two American soldiers were wounded in an ambush, Major Neal O'Brien said.

But, with the American military wary of enraging Iraqis by sending troops into one of the most sacred cities in Shi'ite Islam, the U.S. commander said no assault was imminent.

"Because of where negotiations are right now, we can wait," Colonel Dana Pittard said. "We still want Iraqis to solve the problem."

The U.S. army has said it wants to kill or capture Sadr, who is held up in Najaf, and destroy his militia.

A senior coalition official said it was unclear how far negotiations by various Iraqi intermediaries had progressed.

"It's difficult to get a sense of what's real and what isn't," he said.

Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, commander of the coalition forces, left open the possibility of an assault, promising his troops would be very careful if one were launched.

"We're very sensitive of the holy shrines, as we have always been when we've conducted operations in this country," Sanchez told Australian Broadcasting Corporation television.

"We'll be applying the same levels of constraint that we've always applied in operating in this country and making sure that we respect the people and that we respect their religious shrines," he said.

HIGH TOLL

The U.S. military has lost more troops in combat in the last three weeks than in the three-week war that toppled Saddam Hussein. Since March 31, 104 U.S. troops have been killed in action.

But the top U.S. military spokesman in Iraq Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt said the 24 hours to Monday evening had been "remarkably" quiet, with no troops killed and attacks well below the average of around 50 over the last two weeks.

Still, there were several explosions in Baghdad Monday, one of them in the grounds of the Swedish embassy, unstaffed since 1991. There were no reports of casualties.

Spain's new Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, who pledged before his election to withdraw his country's troops, said Sunday they would be pulled out as soon as possible.

Other countries in the U.S.-led coalition may follow suit.

"We know that there are others who are going to have to assess how they see the risk," U.S. national security adviser Condoleezza Rice told ABC. "We have 34 countries with forces on the ground. I think there are going to be some changes."



Harry K Thomas

US envoy visits The Daily Star office

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

US Ambassador to Bangladesh Harry K Thomas yesterday afternoon paid a courtesy visit to The Daily Star office and exchanged views with the journalists of the daily.

Talking to newsmen, the US envoy attached special importance on the existing US-Bangladesh ties and informed them of opening two American Centres in Chittagong and Sylhet shortly.

Thomas, who took office in August last year as the 11th US envoy to Dhaka, emphasised the need for strengthening democracy, a sustained aid flow and an enhanced trade and investment volume. He said the US is only second to Japan in terms of providing aids to Bangladesh.

The US ambassador, accompanied by Karl Fritz, director of American Centre, and some embassy staff, also said Islam is a fast growing religion in his country. "We've recruited Imams in US military now. We believe in freedom of religion," he maintained.

The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam and senior staffers attended the opinion-sharing meeting and Thomas later went round different sections of the newspaper office.

Information secy

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The government meanwhile has also transferred three more officials holding rank and status of additional secretary. Director General of Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training Matuir Rahman has been transferred to the Cabinet Division as Additional Secretary and Chief Controller of Import and Export Wahid Uzzaman transferred to the Bureau.

Additional Secretary Fazlur Rahman, who was made officer on special duty, has been appointed as Chief Controller of Import and Export.

Babul

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During the investigation, two accused and three witnesses gave judicial statements before the magistrates revealing the involvement of Babul, Shamim and others in the murder.

In the charge sheet, the IO said: "The arms and ammunition recovered from Babul's office were used for the killing," quoting a ballistic report done by Criminal Investigation Department (CID) Inspector Mohammad Moslem Ali.

Monirul Islam, complainant of the case and owner of a dredger, said in the first information report (FIR) his employee Alam was sleeping on his dredger at about 11:00pm on September 1 last year. An armed gang of about 12 allegedly led by Amir and Ripon stormed into the boat and opened fire on the workers. Fatally injured Alam later died at Suhrawardy Heart Diseases Hospital.

In a supplementary FIR filed on September 7 Monirul quoted Alam as telling his colleagues before death that Amir and Ripon shot him in line with a blueprint of Babul and Shamim. Alam also named Saidur and Dewan as the attackers.

Police arrested Babul from his Gulshan house at 2:15am on March 20 and later showed him arrested in the case. He was also shown arrested in an attempted rape case filed by a woman with Badda Police Station on March 23.

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Judiciary

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citing specific reasons for seeking further extension.

The court yesterday however expressed satisfaction at the government initiative Attorney General AF Hassan Arif explained for the separation of the judiciary.

The government attorney told the court the government complied with the 12-point directive by promulgating Bangladesh Judicial Service Commission Rules, 2004.

Three other rules and a bill for amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) are in the process, added the attorney and elaborated on a series of exercises the government took up for implementation of the directives.

Meanwhile, the contempt petition filed against the government for violating the Supreme Court directives, a hearing on which was scheduled for today, has been kept on record.

"It would be taken up at an appropriate time," the court told the counsel for the petitioner, Amir-ul-Islam, in an apparent reluctance to proceed with the contempt move.

ADP up again for cut

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revised ADP at Tk 18,934 for the financial year 2003-04 instead of the original Tk 20,300 crore.

The government will finalise the revision at a high-level meeting very soon, sources said.

This revision will mostly affect power and road projects where allocations would be reduced by Tk 500 crore.

The revised proposal increased the local currency component of the ADP by Tk 117 crore such that this component now accounts for Tk 11,933 crore of the total amount while the project aid component was slashed by Tk 1,484 crore and brought down to Tk 7,000 crore.

In the first eight months of the current fiscal, only 36 percent of the ADP have been utilised — 42 percent of local currency and 30 percent of project aid.

"Project aid has been used less this financial year because of added conditionality of donors and the new procurement policy," Finance Secretary Zakir Ahmed Khan explained.

The World Bank in its Bangladesh Quarterly Update of April 2004 wrote, "The slow pace of development spending is primarily due to weak implementation capacity and poor disbursement of the foreign aid component."

Drive against

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Minister Akbar Hossain said number of mobile courts will be increased to check the papers of passenger launch and cargo vessels, meeting sources said.

Three mobile courts are operating at Sadarghat in Dhaka, Narayanjan and Barisal launch terminals now. More courts will start functioning at other places from where large number of vessels sail.

Akbar instructed Department of Shipping officials present at the meeting to prepare a list of unregistered vessels in the country within 15 days to stop their operation. He asked the Bloa to help government officials to prepare the list, sources added.

He said action would be taken against illegal vessels on the basis of the list adding that plying of unregistered vessels above 16

The revised ADP reduces project aid in the agriculture sector by Tk 66 crore keeping local resources allocation unchanged.

Project aid was reduced by Tk 156 crore in rural aid and administration, Tk 31 crore in water resources, Tk 16 crore in industry, Tk 266 crore in electricity, Tk 68 crore in energy and Tk 285 crore in transport.

The local currency component was raised by Tk 213 crore for rural aid and administration, Tk 15 crore for water resources, Tk 50 crore for energy and Tk 27 crore for transport while for industry and electricity, it remained unchanged.

The proposed block allocation in the ADP was slashed by Tk 305 crore.

"Every year, the government chalks out an ambitious ADP and every year it is revised due to poor implementation," said a source. "The facts and figures since the early nineties show the same old story of revision."

In the last 13 years, the maximum ADP utilisation occurred in 2001 when Tk 16151 crore was used.

Commenting on low implementation of the ADP, Finance Minister Saifur Rahman recently said, "If we must utilise Tk 20000 crore, we need to chalk out an ADP of Tk 22000 crore."

horsepower would be stopped immediately to ensure commuters' safety.

Bloa leaders suggested for increased dredging activities on various river routes for smooth plying of marine vessels. The minister assured them of implementing a new project shortly for clearing river silts.

The minister also asked launch owners to take extra care about safety of passengers during the rainy season when launch disasters occur most.

Among others, AKM Ahsanul Azim, director general of Department of Shipping, Haider Ali, chairman of Bangladesh Inland Water Transportation Authority, and Shamsur Rahman Shimul Biswas, chairman of Bangladesh Inland Water Transportation Corporation, attended the meeting.

PM lays foundation

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The new bridge will expedite the process of linking Bangladesh and Myanmar by road, gear up construction of the proposed Trans-Asian highway and ensure a hassle-free journey for tourists to some important tourist spots in Anowara, Bandarban and Cox's Bazar, sources said.

The development of Foy's Lake and construction of Motel Saikat will significantly enhance infrastructural facilities in the tourism sector, added the sources.

The Foy's Lake Development Project is expected to be complete in 2007. Under the project, the lake will have an amusement park comprising modern recreational facilities including cable cars, balloon wheels, boating facilities, family coasters, trains, theatres and laser shows.

Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation officials told BSS that construction of Motel Saikat located in the busy station road area on nearly three bighas of land was expected

to be complete in two and a half years.

The 10-storey establishment will have the status of a three-star international hotel. It will have a shopping complex, spacious basement parking for vehicles, tourist information centre, conference room, space for private commercial offices and separate stairs and elevators for boarders and shoppers.

State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin told BSS that the Motel Saikat Complex will become a nerve centre for local and foreign tourists. Tourists bound for Cox's Bazar, Bandarban and Rangamati could facilitate their journey by using facilities of the motel.

The Women's Technical Training Centre to be constructed on 1.72 acres of land at Nasirabad will impart training to about 720 unemployed women every year.

India goes to polls

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elements aided by militant groups have prompted authorities to step up security in Gujarat.

Besides Advani, who is in the fray from Gandhinagar constituency of Gujarat, and Sinha, who is seeking re-election to Hazaribagh seat in Jharkhand, the prominent candidates in the first phase include former prime minister HD Deve Gowda in southern state of Karnataka, and seven ministerial colleagues of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The din and bustle of the campaigning for the first phase of elections ended on Sunday and the door-to-door electioneering came to a close yesterday evening after star campaigners of both BJP and main opposition Congress travelled across the country to woo the voters.

Despite the rising mercury, the Vajpayee and top opposition leader Sonia Gandhi held several rallies.

The second phase of the elections on April 22 will cover only two seats in Tripura state, the third phase takes place on April 28, the fourth on May 5 and the last phase on May 10. The counting of votes is slated for May 13.

An estimated 67 crore voters are likely to cast their votes during five phases to elect 543 Lok Sabha members with the largest number of parliamentary seats being contested in Uttar Pradesh (80) followed by Maharashtra (48), Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal (42 each), Bihar (40) and Madhya Pradesh (39).

The first phase will include all the 26 parliamentary seats in Gujarat, 11 in Chhattisgarh, 24 of the 48 seats in Maharashtra, 21 of the 42 in Andhra Pradesh, 11 of the 40 in

Bihar, eight of the 13 in Assam and 15 out of 39 in Karnataka.

Ruling BJP-led National Democratic Alliance raked up the issue of Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin in a big way and sought votes on the planks of development and stability while Congress and other opposition parties zeroed in on the scams that came to the fore during six years of NDA rule.

Electioneering at times tended to be marred by mud-slinging with personal attacks on Sonia and Congress seeking to question Vajpayee's role during India's freedom movement.

Surrogate political advertisements had flooded the popular television channels targeting Sonia and Vajpayee raising a stink and prompting the Supreme Court to suggest a set of guidelines to the Election Commission to vet such advertisements before their clearance for telecast.

President APJ Abdul Kalam meanwhile has appealed to the voters to come out in large number and 'vote positively', saying the right to vote is a 'sacred right and an onerous responsibility you owe to the motherland'.

In a televised address to the nation on Sunday night, he said 'by casting your vote you in your opinion can represent you in the Lok Sabha, you are sowing the seeds for the creation of a prosperous India, a happy India, a safe India, a secure India and above all, an India with nobility'.

This was the first time that the president of India has chosen to appeal to the voters ahead of parliamentary elections.

Hillary Clinton not interested to be Kerry's running mate

AFP, Washington

Senator Hillary Clinton insisted yesterday she has no interest in becoming the vice presidential candidate with Democratic challenger John Kerry.

"I would not do it," the wife of former president Bill Clinton told ABC television in an interview.

She added however that she is an enthusiastic supporter of the Massachusetts senator.

"I am going to support John Kerry, whom I think would be a terrific president in every way, and whoever he chooses. It's going to be a positive ticket for the future," she said.

Clinton added that the deteriorating security in Iraq, and the mounting US military casualties there, underscored the need for a new occupant of the White House.

"The events of the last months have proven really beyond debate that this administration fails both on credibility and competence and they shouldn't have their contract renewed for another four years," she said.

"We're losing now 99 of our young men and women just this month and there's no end in sight," Clinton said.

She brushed aside recent criticism by senior members of President George W. Bush's administration that global terrorism — perpetrated by groups like Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network — not given enough priority by President Clinton.

"I have no doubt that my husband and his administration did everything they could think of to do. They were obsessed with al-Qaeda, and they passed that on to the Bush administration," said the senator for New York state.

3 killed

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sustained multiple cut injuries and fractures.

Our Mymensingh correspondent reported that the tornado lashed six unions of Phulbaria, Trishal and Bhaluka upazilas Sunday evening.

Upazila administration sources said the tornado hit Kaladaha, Naogaon, Asim, Harirampur, Dhanikola and Uthora unions at 7:00 pm. Twelve out of 50 injured were admitted to the MMCH and the rest to different health centres.

The storm damaged more than 500 houses and uprooted hundreds of trees.

The victims of Wednesday's twin tornadoes need their houses to be rebuilt on a priority basis as they are living under the open sky, our correspondents said.

"Crisis of food troubles us much but we are suffering more due to lack of shelter," said a victim. Many others echoed him.

Our Mymensingh correspondent said not any of the houses damaged in Wednesday's tornado in Kaliai Kasda, Boalmara, Samulia Para and Gazir Bhitia was rebuilt till yesterday.

However, army personnel have set up some 50 tents in the affected Samulia Para and Gazir Bhitia for the shelterless. They have also repaired 18 tubewells and installed three to ease drinking water crisis.

The relief ministry yesterday decided to allocate Tk 2 crore and 1250 bundles of corrugated tin as house building assistance for the tornado victims of Mymensingh and Netrakona. It also decided to provide Tk 12,50,000 in cash assistance, 500 tonnes of rice, 800 pieces of lungi and an equal number sari and 1000 tins of biscuit.

Meanwhile, taking advantage of the heavy rush of people to the tornado-hit villages in Halughat upazila, tempo drivers and rickshawpullers have greatly increased fare.

Traffic barred

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office-goers, school students and their guardians, suffered the most at New Market, Rail Station, CDA Avenue, GEC Crossing, Muradpur, Bahaddarhat, Agrabad and Bakalia points for the restriction.

Police ordered the 20-kilometre Biswa Road (Asian highway) stretching from Shah Amanat International Airport to Kamaphul Shah Amanat Bridge off limits to vehicular traffic from 11:00am. They also stopped vehicles on the road from Bahaddarhat Intersection to Kamaphul Bridge ahead of the prime minister's arrival.

Other city roads leading to the Outer Stadium came under restriction or were made off limits until the prime minister left the venue.

"This is unbelievable in a civilised country. Why should our kids be barred from returning home in time," blasted a guardian at GEC Crossing, sitting stranded in a rickshaw with his son.

RU appointment

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senators submitted separate memoranda to the VC demanding that the university authorities cancel the move to make the appointments or face a strike.

RU authorities Saturday appointed 327 third class and 217 fourth class staff on a daily basis against 270 vacant posts allegedly without following proper appointment procedure.

Dhaka-Beijing row

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"China believes that the inauguration of the trade centre is being done under a package of actions," Mintoo said, adding the Chinese envoy expressed his beliefs that the centre was not really a trade office and Bangladesh was hiding facts.

Chai officially conveyed Chinese objection to the opening of the office at a meeting with Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan on March 14. The ambassador called on Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on the same issue on March 30.

Responding to Chai's request, Mintoo held informal talks with Prime Minister's Principal Secretary Kamal Uddin Siddiqui and Foreign Secretary Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury at Sonargaon Hotel where they gathered to bid farewell to outgoing British High Commissioner David Carter.

"I will now seek an appointment with the prime minister before the inauguration of the trade centre," Mintoo told The Daily Star without disclosing details of his meeting with the principal secretary.

"We want to promote private business with Taiwan. But it's not desirable to damage relationship with another country," he said, "that is why I will meet the prime minister requesting her to do everything by mending the fences with China."

Explaining why the Dhaka-Beijing relations did not improve despite some initial sings of progress, Mintoo said: "There was no talks after that. It has widened the gap. That is why we should request the prime minister to send a special envoy to Beijing with her letter."

Mintoo will also meet the chief of the Taiwan office, requesting him to defer the inauguration schedule.

Both Kamaluddin and Shamsheer declined to comment on their talks

with Mintoo.

Executive Chairman of the Board of Investment Mahmudur Rahman said, "There will be no inauguration of the Taiwanese Trade Centre on April 26. But there will be meetings between a 71-member Taiwanese business delegation and Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry."

On Chinese demand for closeness of the Taipei representative office, he said: "It's absolutely a trade office. It has no diplomatic or political links. We want greater foreign investment in the interest of Bangladesh's development."

Maradona

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"The last electrocardiogramme showed his condition had improved," he added. He said the condition of his heart had not deteriorated.

Maradona, who has been battling drug addiction for years, has been sedated and was attached to a respirator.

In 2000, in Uruguay, Maradona suffered a severe heart crisis due to a cocaine overdose.

He then began a long recovery treatment in Cuba, but since an overweight Maradona returned to Argentina, speculation and concern has grown over his health.

In his 20-year career, Maradona won Italian and Argentine league titles and led Argentina to World Cup victory in 1986 and second place in 1990.

In 2000, Maradona tied with Pele for the accolade of FIFA's best ever player.

Spanish PM

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counterpart, Miguel Angel Moratinos, that Spain would pull out of Iraq in 15 days. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity.

Egypt's foreign ministry later backtracked from that in a statement, however, saying the Spanish leader said "the date will be announced in Iraq and has not yet been fixed."

In Washington, US officials said Zapatero's announcement was not a surprise.

"We knew from the recent Spanish election that it was the new prime minister's intention to withdraw Spanish troops from the coalition in Iraq," said a White House spokesman, Ken Lisaius. "We will work with our coalition partners in Iraq and the Spanish government and expect they will implement their decision in a coordinated, responsible and orderly manner."

Mariano Rajoy, who ran against Zapatero in the election after Aznar decided not to seek another term, said the decision made Spain "much more vulnerable and weak in the face of terrorism in the face of terrorism."

Zapatero has "thrown in the towel" rather than try to exhaust all possibilities of getting a UN resolution to meet his demands, Rajoy said.

But many other politicians praised Zapatero, including Jose Antonio Labordeta, a congressman from a small party based in Aragon in the northeast.

"What Zapatero did is keep his word, which is rare in this country. For the first time, we have come across a politician who keeps his word," Labordeta told the news agency Efe.

Bono, the defense secretary, is reported to have met secretly in Washington with Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld on April 5.

Moratinos, the foreign secretary, said he will travel Tuesday to Washington to discuss Spain's plans with Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

Before Sunday's announcement, the newspaper El Pais said Moratinos would offer nonmilitary cooperation, such as training Iraqi police, if Zapatero made good on his vow. Now, it appears the visit was designed from the outset to announce the withdrawal decision, not to talk about how to keep Spanish troops in place.