

2 Syrians, 4 Jordanian truckers abducted

Militants threaten to execute Indian hostage

AFP, Amman

Two Syrian truck drivers were abducted from the same convoy from which four Jordanians were already reported captured this week, one of their colleagues told yesterday's Jordanian press.

"Our convoy was made up of 17 trucks driven by Syrians and Jordanians. It was transporting household appliances from Dubai when it was intercepted Tuesday by armed men near the Abu Ghraib prison" west of Baghdad, Jordanian trucker Mustapha Abdelkarim al-Ayed told a newspaper here.

In addition to the four Jordanians, "the group also abducted two Syrian truck drivers," he said, without elaborating.

In a videotape aired by Dubai Television, an Islamist group said Thursday it was holding four Jordanians and called on the people of the kingdom to pressure their government to end its support for the US-led forces in the country.

Ayed, 39, who managed to escape the attack because he was at the head of the convoy, identified two of the Jordanians as Mohammad Khleifat and Mohammad Abu Jaafar.

He said the convoy was not carrying any goods destined for the US army.

Two other Jordanian drivers were kidnapped Monday and reportedly threatened with death unless their employer stopped work in the country within 72 hours.

Their employer, Daoud and Partners, which provides food supplies to US troops in Iraq,

announced Tuesday that it would cease operations in Iraq to obtain its drivers' release, which has yet to occur.

A Jordanian businessman, Wael Mamduh, was abducted from a hotel in the southern city of Basra on April 11 by men disguised in police uniforms.

Meanwhile, militants in Iraq threatened to behead an Indian hostage unless his Kuwaiti firm quits the country, according to a statement from the "Islamic Secret Army" received by AFP on Thursday.

"We will slit the throat of one of the (Indian) hostages on Friday at 7:00 pm (1500 GMT) if our demands are not met," it said.

The authenticity of the statement could not independently verified and Indian ambassador to Iraq, Brij Mohan Tyagi, told AFP that the embassy "has been assured that its citizens being held in Iraq are safe and in good health."

The group accused the Indian government of losing its "credibility" and "deviating from (independence champion Mohandas) Gandhi's path of peace", branding the hostages "fighters supporting the infidel occupation".

It also lashed out at the embassies for failing to act, prompting Tyagi to issue a hasty appeal for mercy.

New Delhi "has issued an appeal for the safe and early release of Indian officials being held in Iraq," he said.

"The embassy of India in Baghdad wishes to reaffirm this appeal. It is reiterated that the three

Indians are poor people who went to Kuwait seeking employment. They are not working for occupational forces," Tyagi added.

He urged the kidnappers to release the Indians so they could rejoin their families, insisting that they would not return to Iraq.

Earlier this week, the kidnappers stayed a threatened deadline to start executing its hostages from 1600 GMT Monday.

"The leadership of the Islamic Secret Army, of which the Holders of the Black Banners is a division, has decided to extend the deadline," said a statement read out on a video clip broadcast by Al-Arabiya television.

It said Sheikh Hisham al-Dulaimi had been appointed as a go-between by the militants in a bid to win them release.

A video broadcast by private Indian network NDTV showed a gun cocked at one of three Indian truckers who are being held with three Kenyans and an Egyptian colleague in Iraq.

Meanwhile, the Kuwaiti employer of an Indian hostage in Iraq said on Friday it would send an official to negotiate with the kidnappers in an attempt to stage off an execution threat, says Reuters from Kuwait.

"A representative of the company is going tomorrow (Saturday). We have no specific time, it depends on formalities here. It takes some time to get the okay to go to Iraq," said spokesperson Rana Abu Zaineh of the Kuwait and Gulf Link Transport Company.

Kerry vows to restore

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a can-do leader and convincing voters that Kerry has not earned the right to be commander in chief.

Beginning a two-day swing through four presidential battlegrounds after a week's vacation at his Texas ranch, Bush planned to say in a new stump speech that, "When it comes to choosing a president, results matter," according to excerpts of the speech obtained by The Associated Press.

Aides said that was meant to be a subtle suggestion that Kerry has not produced much in his two decades in the Senate.

The Democrats' convention, a four-day show of unity behind Kerry, was designed to tell millions of undecided voters in key states about his Vietnam War service and persuade them that he is prepared to lead and defend the country in an age of terrorism.

Thirteen men who served with Kerry on swiftboats three decades ago in the Mekong Delta shared his spotlight, and a 9 1/2-minute biographical film featured Kerry's own war footage.

Polls show Bush losing public support on Iraq, dropping to 42 percent earlier this month from 59 percent six months ago, according to a Pew Research Center survey.

Kerry, referring to critics' claims that the president's decision to invade Iraq was based on faulty evidence, promised immediate reforms of the US intelligence system so "policy is guided by facts, and facts are never distorted by politics."

He expanded his criticism far beyond Iraq as he sought to draw

contrast with the president on the national security issues he has placed at the core of his challenge for the White House.

Kerry vowed to reverse policies that send US jobs overseas and promised to expand health care, improve education and "fight a smarter, more effective war" against terror.

"In these dangerous days there is a right way and a wrong way to be strong," he said. "Strength is more than tough words."

When he cited US job losses, rising health care costs, pollution and homelessness under Bush, Kerry repeated the phrase: "America can do better. And help is on the way."

Republicans said he has taken inconsistent positions on the war against terror, and that he should explain himself.

Kerry voted in 2002 for the congressional resolution authorizing the use of force in Iraq, but then voted against providing \$87 billion for US troops and reconstruction.

"John Kerry missed an opportunity to help the American people understand his vote for the war in Iraq based on the same intelligence that the president viewed," Bush campaign chairman Marc Racicot said. "He's right, America can do better."

As the Democratic nominee, Kerry gets \$75 million in public money for the general campaign, the only money he can spend through Nov. 2. Bush, who had \$64 million on hand at the beginning of July, gets his \$75 million in taxpayer dollars in early September.

Saddam says no to biopsy

ANI, London

Blood tests and x-rays carried out by American doctors on deposed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein have ruled out chances of him suffering from cancer as was reported on Thursday.

Iraqi Human Rights Minister Bakhtiar Amin was quoted by the Daily News as saying that Saddam is suffering from a chronic prostate infection, but has refused to undergo a biopsy to rule out any chance of him having cancer.

Amin, who was speaking in an interview on Al-Jazeera television said Saddam otherwise seemed to be in good health.

Chronic prostate infections are common, occurring in about 35 percent of all men over 50, but are not linked to cancer. However, routine screening for prostate cancer, especially among older men, is common.

Saddam, 67, has been held under US detention at an undisclosed location in Iraq since his capture last December.

On Thursday, one of Saddam's lawyers, a Jordanian, was quoted as saying that the dictator had suffered a stroke, and could die before his trial.

"Saddam did not have a stroke and he is not dead," First Sergeant Steve Valley was quoted as saying by a foreign news agency.

Expressway

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his country's support for Bangladesh to get membership of Asean Regional Forum.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia along with other BIMST-EC leaders called on Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej at the Royal Palace in the afternoon. She also attended an official dinner hosted by the Thai prime minister in honour of the BIMST-EC at the Government House.

Khaleda will deliver her speech at the BIMST-EC summit this morning. She will also have bilateral talks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Diarrhoea

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Hundreds of people, mostly children, at the flood shelters in the capital are also suffering from diarrhoea, skin diseases and other ailments. Crisis of food, drinking water and medicine is compounding their woes.

Meanwhile, sufferings of poor people like rickshaw-pullers and day labourers have mounted due to the floods and many of them cannot afford to buy food and other essentials as they do not have work.

"I used to earn about Tk 120 a day pulling rickshaw. But I had to leave my rented house at Meradia as the entire area went under waist to chest-deep water. Now I am out of work as I have moved elsewhere," said Md Faruque.

The health directorate has deployed 83 medical teams in the inundated city areas. Each team comprises one doctor, one intern doctor, one nurse and a paramedic.

"Our teams boarding boats are now treating patients and distributing emergency items like water purification tablets and oral saline and medicines," said Dr Saleh Mohammad Rafiq, civil surgeon of Dhaka.

He went on, "We have already distributed one lakh and forty thousand water purification tablets and over 80,000 packets of oral saline. The process will continue as we have enough stock of such items."

Weavers

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demanded that the government withdraw the cases and relieve the weavers of the credit. The government approved the weavers Tk 160-crore loan, of which Tk 25 crore remained default, the leaders of the organisation told a press briefing yesterday.

"Many weavers were forced to leave the profession due to the negative attitude of the successive governments towards the sector," said Shamsul Alam Jullikar, general secretary of the organisation, at a press conference yesterday.

The weavers were the worst victims of the floods in 1988 and 1998 but "although the government and different organisations are putting effort for rehabilitation of flood-hit farmers, no-one pays attention to us," Jullikar alleged.

The floods have damaged 5,000 handlooms in Sonargaon, Rupganj and Siddhirganj and left many weavers jobless, he said.

Without the government's assistance, the weavers cannot overcome the situation, he added.

Weavers had taken different initiatives including savings and credit programmes to improve the sector but all of their efforts turned futile due to the floods, said Jullikar.

"If proper steps are taken to develop the industry, it can again contribute to the country's economy."

The leaders asked the government to meet their demands immediately. Otherwise they will announce tougher programmes through a press conference on August 28.

Petrobangla

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fled Niko in the Second Round Block Bidding for oil and gas exploration under PSCs in 1997. But it allegedly kept on trying to enter Bangladeshi gas sector through back-door and finally got access to the sector through a hush-hush joint venture deal with Bapex and also through purchasing shares of an American oil company in Block 9.

Last year's deal with Bapex allows Niko's access to three marginal or previous gas fields and one unexplored gas field. This deal was made violating the government policy that an unexplored gas field will be given to foreign oil companies through competitive bidding if it is not reserved for the future. The joint venture deal also helped Niko avoid a competitive bidding. But Niko wants incentives and benefits received by competitive bidders who signed PSCs.

Referring to the killing of Ahsanullah Master MP the AL president said it was part of a BNP blueprint to eliminate popular leaders and workers of her party as it (AL) cannot be defeated in elections.

"People rejected the vote thieves in 1996... This time also they will reject the vote thieves and punish them," Hasina said. No-one can cling to power through repression and torture, she added.

The former prime minister blamed the coalition government for 'destroying' all democratic institutions and the judiciary, and making the administration partisan.

AL central leaders including Tofail Ahmed, Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir and Abdul Mannan were present on the occasion.

Newly-elected president and general secretary of Bhola District Lawyers' Association Jahangir Alam and Bashirullah also spoke at the meeting.

Pak PM

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"It was a murder (attempt) on the minister. We are still investigating circumstances under which the attack occurred," he said.

Ruling Pakistan Muslim League Party Secretary-General Mushahid Hussain also told AFP the suicide attack was directed at Aziz.

"A suicide bomber blew up the car to kill Shaikat Aziz, but he has survived miraculously," Hussain said.

"They are trying to destabilise Pakistan," Hussain said, blaming religious extremists for the attack.

A national television report said two blasts occurred in a car as Aziz was about to get into his own vehicle after addressing a public meeting.

Floodwaters recede

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bulletins said.

SCARRED NORTHEAST
Diarrhoea has been spreading with the water recession from different upazilas in Sylhet, Sunamganj, Habiganj and Moulvibazar. The situation turned serious in remote areas where most tubewells went underwater.

The scarcity of drinking water hit most upazilas. All hospitals in the region saw a rash of diarrhoea patients.

The floods in Muladi, Babuganj and Banaripara upazilas in Barisal and Kotlipara in Gopalganj deteriorated in the last 24 hours.

Seventy-year-old Moslem Bhuiyan starved to death in flood-ravaged Batamara in Muladi upazila early Thursday, raising the death toll to 15 in Barisal.

AFP adds: Food and Disaster Management Minister Kamal Ibne Yusuf said a UN team was to arrive in Dhaka yesterday to assess the damage from the floods that have submerged wide tracts of farmland, villages and cities.

BIMST-EC summit

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and cooperation will be a gradual evolution, it will be a slow process.

"It's very nominal compared with Thai-US trade, Japanese or other Asian countries."

Sunandan Chowdhury, an expert on globalisation from India, said the effectiveness of the group was hampered by the absence of countries like Singapore, India's largest trading partner in Southeast Asia.

He said other established organisations -- such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) -- were more effective at representing their members.

"It's my hunch that 95 percent of college lecturers in India don't know what BIMSTEC is," Chowdhury said. The battles against terrorism and HIV/AIDS and the creation of an Asian monetary fund were due to feature during the two days of discussions among foreign ministers, six prime ministers and the Sri Lankan president, Thai officials said.

While foreign ministers met yesterday, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had face-to-face sessions with fellow leaders.

They included Myanmar counterpart General Khin Nyunt who refused to bow to international

pressure over the release of democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Khin Nyunt said that Myanmar would decide on the appropriate and proper timing for the date of Aung San Suu Kyi's release, "Thaksin told reporters after the meeting, Myanmar is an independent country, they don't want anyone to interfere with their internal matters."

The summit marked the first overseas trip by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh since taking office in May. "We believe BIMSTEC can evolve into a dynamic, exemplary, economic grouping," Singh said in an interview with The Nation newspaper Friday.

BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand - Economic Cooperation) was founded in 1997 -- the year the Asian economic crisis hit -- to promote trade focusing on six key sectors from tourism to technology.

The three most advanced members, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, are committed to trade liberalisation by 2012, with the others following within five years.

The signing of a free trade agreement in the Thai resort province of Phuket earlier this year was almost superseded by the late withdrawal of Bangladesh because of a row over compensation for lost tariff revenue.

4 lakh people in Kishoreganj awaiting relief, Zillur alleges

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Over 4 lakh flood-affected people in Kishoreganj have not yet received any relief and are living amid profound uncertainty, Awami League (AL) presidium member Zillur Rahman alleged yesterday.

"In every union of the district's flood-hit areas, opening of two gruel kitchens and a mobile medical team is now an emergency," Zillur told a press conference at AL central office yesterday.

He urged the government to ensure impartial distribution of foreign aid among the flood victims without politicising the relief activity.

The AL leader said the sufferings of the flood victims are mounting every day but the government has not taken sufficient steps to ease their ordeal.

Diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases broke out in the flood-affected areas and have already reached an epidemic level, he added.

Supply of drinking water and sanitation system have collapsed in the affected areas, he said.

Gazipur by-polls

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senior party leaders and party nominee MA Mannan addressed the rally while AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil and other opposition leaders as well as the party candidate Russell tried to swing voters in the last minute rally.

In a press release yesterday the Election Commission (EC) Secretariat declared a holiday in Gazipur-2 constituency on the polling day to enable voters to exercise their franchise.

Votes would be cast at as many as 195 polling centres and the EC has already deployed army, police, BDR and members of other law enforcement agencies for fair holding of the by-poll in the wake of controversial Dhaka-10 by-election.

Ruling coalition candidate and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's former political secretary Mosaddak Ali Fahu won the polls amid widespread allegations of vote rigging, false voting and intimidation of rival political activists.

The AL boycotted the July 1 by-polls, but lent support to retired army major Abdul Mannan, a Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh contestant.

The Gazipur-2 by-polls coincide with monsoon flooding that has swamped most regions and brought life to its knees.

The Election Commission on Thursday decided to drop 14 polling officials with alleged bias towards a political party and relocate 22 swamped polling centres.

The EC move came in the wake of AL's allegation that the ruling alliance was planning to rig the polls in connivance with the officials.

Pakistan captures key al-Qaeda bombing suspect

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has captured a key suspect in the 1998 Al-Qaeda bombings of two US embassies in east Africa, officials announced yesterday, in a coup that officials and analysts said would weaken the terrorist group.

Ahmed Khalaf Ghailani, 30, a Tanzanian on the FBI's most-wanted list, was arrested after a fierce eight-hour shootout with security forces in an eastern Pakistani industrial town on July 25, Interior Minister Faisal Saleh Hayat said.

"This is a very significant capture because he was an important player in the Al-Qaeda hierarchy," Hayat told AFP calling the arrest "a phenomenal success in the international fight against terrorism."

Hayat was confident his arrest could shed light on the whereabouts of Al-Qaeda's elusive figurehead, Osama bin Laden. "Every high profile arrest certainly opens new avenues and a new approach towards achieving the ultimate objective of capturing bin Laden," the minister said.

Ghailani was caught hiding with four men, three women including his Uzbek wife, and six children in a house in Gujarat, 160 kilometers southeast of Islamabad.

He is accused by the United States of involvement in the August 7, 1998, car bombings of the US

embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi.

The attacks have been blamed on the terror network headed by bin Laden -- who is believed to be hiding along the mountainous border of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Nairobi attack killed 213 people and injured more than 5,000. Eleven people were killed in the almost simultaneous attack on the Dares Salaam embassy.

Ghailani was indicted in New York in December 1998 for his alleged role in the Dar es Salaam attack and now carries a five million dollar bounty on his head.

Al-Qaeda expert Rohan Gunaratna, head of terrorism research at the Singapore-based Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, said Ghailani had long been involved in Al-Qaeda's operational planning.

"He is one of the most important leaders of Al-Qaeda involved in operational planning for a long time. Al-Qaeda has already weakened but his arrest will further weaken the group," Gunaratna told AFP.

He said Ghailani could well yield valuable information in the hunt for bin Laden -- the top quarry in Washington's "war on terror."

Ghailani is the fourth top Al-Qaeda figure arrested in Pakistan in the nearly three-year war on terror.

Proshika wants

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Director Giasuddin also addressed the conference.

The government has kept Tk 300 crore of different projects of Proshika frozen, a share of which, the officials said, could be re-allocated for flood rehabilitation programmes.

The officials said Proshika possesses significant experience in disaster management and about 10,000 of its staff are waiting for the fund-release to start relief and rehabilitation work in the flood-ravaged areas.

On the basis of their 20-year experience in disaster management, the officials said the current spate of flooding the first phase resulting from overflow of the Brahmaputra-Meghna river system. The overflow of the Ganges-Padma river system will bring in the second phase of flooding by mid-August due to heavy rainfall and the full moon in that month, they added.

"The excessive damage to Aman crop by the recent flooding in 30 districts will lead to a famine-like situation for millions, as there will be no rice harvest until March next year," Qazi Faruque, also the president of ADAB, warned.

He said, to address the situation, food has to be provided to the flood victims through vulnerable group feeding (VGF) cards until February. And immediate rehabilitation programme including medical support, supply of safe drinking

FLOODS

China, Lanka, Bhutan express sympathy

BSS, Dhaka

Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Bhutanese King Jigme Singye Wangchuck have expressed their sympathy for the flood-hit people of Bangladesh.

In a message to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on Thursday, Wen said: "I myself and on behalf of the Chinese government would like to convey our deep sympathy to the government and people of Bangladesh at the loss of lives and extensive damage caused by the floods."

The Chinese premier expressed his firm belief that the people and government of Bangladesh would be able to overcome this disaster and rehabilitate the beautiful Bangladesh.

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has expressed her sympathy for the flood affected people of Bangladesh.

In a message to President Iajuddin Ahmed yesterday, Kumaratunga said the government and people of Sri Lanka would stand by the affected people at this juncture.

The King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck yesterday expressed his concern over the devastation caused by floods in Bangladesh.

"I am following with anxiety during the last couple of days the deteriorating flood situation in Bangladesh," he said.

The King conveyed his concern through Bangladesh Ambassador to Bhutan Mohammad Enamul Kabir, who called on the king at his palace in the Bhutanese capital, Thimphu, a foreign ministry press release said here.

"Bhutan with its small capacity and means is always ready to stand by the flood-hit people of Bangladesh," the King said.

water and house-building materials, repairing roads and providing seeds to the peasants could prevent the post-flood famine, he added.

He said, "The huge sum the country needs for the disaster management is not a big problem as the donors are quite willing to support. What is needed is a united and concerted effort by the government, NGOs, private sector and other organisations and individuals to offset the post-flood perils."

"Our staff have donated 7.5 percent of their salaries to Proshika's relief fund and are ready in the fields to run the relief and rehabilitation programmes, if only government provides the resources," Faruque added.

DNA pioneer Crick dies

AFP, Los Angeles

British Nobel laureate Francis Crick, who with American James Watson discovered the double-helix structure of DNA that revolutionized genetics and spawned the ubiquitous field of biotechnology, has died at 88, associates said Thursday.

Crick, who won the Nobel Prize for medicine in 1962, passed away late Wednesday at a hospital in San Diego, California, where he had been battling colon cancer.

"I will always remember Francis for his extraordinarily focused intelligence and for the many ways he showed me kindness and developed my self-confidence," Watson said in a statement.

Praise also poured in from others in the scientific community who worked with Crick.

Francis Crick will be remembered as one of the most brilliant and influential scientists of all time," said Richard Murphy, president and chief executive officer of the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, where Crick had worked.

On April 25, 1953, Crick and Watson published in the British journal Nature their model of the structure of deoxyribonucleic acid, or DNA, a molecule found in the nucleus of cells.

After intense studies at Cambridge University, the pair described a double helix, joined by rungs comprising pairs of four chemicals, and humbly suggested it could be the means for copying genetic material.

The implication was stunning: DNA was nothing less than the inherited template for creating and sustaining life.

The impact of their discovery is recognized by many as one of the most significant of the 20th century and affects practically every discipline in the lifesciences.

US troops

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admitted to hospital on Friday with injuries when US troops clashed with gunmen near homes in Khaldiya, west of Fallujah.

There was no confirmation of the incident from the US military.