

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 Abdellatif 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 be 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 at 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 the men's 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 stave 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.

Meanwhile, the Kuwai

Kerry vows to restore

FROM PAGE 12

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.

Three 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 a

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.

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 Khalid 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 Dar es 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.

BIMST-EC summit

FROM PAGE 1

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."

Sundan 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 foreign leaders.

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

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) president member Zillur Rahman alleged yesterday.

"In every union of the district's flood-hit areas, opening of two ghat 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.

Asia Cup

FROM PAGE 1

days ago. There is no reason why we can't do it again."

The Indians will be boosted by the likely return of seasoned batsman Venkatesh Lakshman, who missed the previous two games against Pakistan and Sri Lanka with a badly bruised knee.

"He should be fit for the final," said team physiotherapist Andrew Leipus.

Left-arm seamer Zaheer Khan, troubled by a nagging hamstring injury, is also expected to keep his place after bowling a tight final over against Sri Lanka on Sunday.

"Zaheer is a little bit stiff but am I am confident we will have a full-strength squad for the final," Leipus said.

Sri Lanka will also regain the services of premier bowlers Chaminda Vaas and Muttiah Muralitharan, who missed the last match against India.

With both Vaas and Murali around we will be much stronger and hard to beat," said captain Marvan Atapattu.

"It will be a great contest."

Gazipur by-polls

FROM PAGE 1

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 votes 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 Falu won the polls amid widespread allegations of vote rigging, false voting and intimidation of rival political activists.

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 Kotalipara in Gopalganj deteriorated in the last 24 hours.

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 swapped 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.

AL men

FROM PAGE 1

newly-elected office bearers of Bholia District Lawyers' Association, who met her at the AL's Dhanmondi office.

She also called upon all sections of people to stand by the flood-affected and carry out relief operation for them.

Hasina criticised the prime minister for what she said is "making a mockery with people's miseries."

She said this referring to the prime minister's reported remarks at a recent meeting in a flood-hit area that flood also has some good aspects for agriculture and other sectors.

Ruling the BIMST-EC 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 Bholia District Lawyers' Association Jahangir Alam and Bashirullah also spoke at the meeting.