

Humayun Azad

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as saying, "There is absolutely no evidence of any violence," he said. "He died of natural causes."

The spokesman said tests for poisons or toxins had been undertaken and the results would be available in a few weeks.

Bangladesh High Commissioner in Berlin Alimul Haque told The Daily Star yesterday by phone that Munich police informed the High Commission upon receipt of Azad's postmortem that his death was natural.

But Azad's distraught family alleged foul play in reaction less than a week after he sought safety in Germany in the wake of a death threat in June. Latifa Kohinoor, wife of Azad, demanded an inquiry and alleged: "He was killed in a conspiracy. I don't believe it was a normal death. He was killed in a planned way."

The 57-year-old who was surviving with his wife, son Anannya Azad and daughters Mouli Azad and Smita Azad, wrote more than 60 books of poetry, novels, articles and comparative literature and was a staunch feminist and a fearless critic of human rights violations. Azad received the Bangla Academy Award in 1996.

A German Embassy official in Dhaka told the family that the German authorities asked the Bangladesh High Commission in Germany to arrange for sending Azad's body back home after he was found dead on his bed at Munich University dormitory shortly before 11:00am German time.

"We are an 11-hour drive from the spot but waiting in touch with Munich. We are now getting for instructions from the foreign ministry to send his body back home," Alimul said.

FANS IN SHOCK

Hundreds of people representing a broad spectrum of society gathered in and outside Azad's house on Fuller Road in Dhaka, turning the area into a dismal scene of mourners. Teachers, students, journalists, publishers and other professionals found themselves flashing back to their days with the scholarly writer.

He survived a brutal attack on the night of February 27 near Bangla Academy when he was going back home from the Ekushey Book Fair, an annual event in memory of Language Movement martyrs.

His family at the time blamed the attack on headline Islamists believed to be angered by his latest book "Pak Sar Zamin Saad Baad" which was set in the 1971 War of Independence from

Pakistan. It triggered controversy in and outside political and academic circles for his bitter criticism about fanaticism.

He recovered from his critical injuries after long treatment at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) in Dhaka and Bumrungrad Hospital in Bangkok.

DEATH COMES TO LIGHT

Since Azad did not turn up for the appointment with the president of PEN (International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists and Novelists), the president's son went to his room but no-one answered the door.

The apartment authorities called the officials of emergency service who opened the door to find Azad in 'deep sleep'.

Back in Dhaka, Head of German Cultural Section Guido Genrich, Information Officer Mujtaba Morshed and some senior teachers of Dhaka University, where he was a professor of Bangla, went to Azad's house at about 9:00am yesterday and broke the news to his wife and children.

A source in the German Embassy said the embassy received the information from Germany Thursday afternoon and went to Azad's house at about 8:30pm to convey it to his family.

But Azad's wife and children were in hospital to see the ailing younger brother of Azad at the time and the officials did not break the news to his younger daughter Smita, as there was no senior family member at home.

His son Anannya and daughter Mouli told reporters that they had telephone conversations thrice with their father, with the last on the night of August 9. He was in good health, they said.

RIFE ALLEGATIONS

"The conspirators murdered him in Germany as they failed in Bangladesh," Azad's wife Kohinoor alleged and questioned why the death news was conveyed much later.

Anannya, a student of class X, escaped from his abductors on the Dhaka University campus last month, whom he linked to the February 27 attempt on Azad's life.

The abductors tried to extract information from Anannya about his father's next visit abroad before he ran away from two hours of captivity.

Private news agency UNB quoted Mouli as saying Azad's body will be donated to Bangladesh Medical College Hospital as he wished.

Jailers pass the buck

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'false'. He said the prison officials whose illegal incomes were barred by what he said was his drive against corruption in prisons are propagandising such lies.

Jailers, on the other hand, alleged if they refuse to pay the monthly tolls, the higher authorities serve them with transfer orders on 'administrative grounds'.

RULES OF THE GAME

Elaborating on the sponging procedure, a recently retired jailer told The Daily Star, "Henchmen of the top brasses send anonymous letters of allegations against a targeted prison staff. The top bosses then fix the toll amount on the basis of number of such complaint letters."

If the prison keeper refuses to pay, he suffers a punishment transfer, said the former jailer preferring not to be named.

"But once he agrees to pay the tolls, investigations into the imaginary irregularities stop immediately. He may even get a better posting in a short while," he added.

That exactly was the case with a jailer stationed in Cox's Bazar. He was transferred to Sherpur for administrative reasons. But, as he gave in to the investigators, he was awarded with a 'favourable' posting at Mymensingh Jail in three months.

It was also alleged that underhand financial deals see promote officials get appointed to important posts and prisons bypassing their seniors.

Cox's Bazar Jail Superintendent S Huda, the youngest jail superintendent of Bangladesh, has been made an acting jailer of Kashipur jail.

After a detainee had escaped through the main gate of Narayanganj prison, its Jailer Zahid Hossain, instead of punishment for the incident, was posted to Dinajpur Jail.

On the other hand, headquarters' displeasure made Jailer Subodh Ranjan Saha of Narayanganj transferred to Lakkhipur, then to Bandarban, Brahmanbaria and lastly to Comilla jails.

Another jailer, Arif Rahman, was transferred from Jhalokathi to Comilla, then to Rangamati, Bandarban, Comilla and later to another jail.

In the last six months, Jailer Solaiman Ali was transferred from Narayanganj to Dinajpur, and two weeks ago, to Sylhet. Rajbari Jailer Al Mamun was sent to Brahmanbaria and then to Bandarban.

Administrative transfers saw Jailer Gafur Mollick running from Munshiganj to Jessore, Jailer Mokhesur Rahman from Nilfamar to Bogra and Jailer Khondoker Mosharrar Hossain from Bogra to Rangpur.

Khaled Hossain, head assistant at the prison directorate, was transferred to Rangpur Central Jail where there is no such post. The order in the face of strong criticism was revoked three days later.

Jail staff also alleged serious degradation in the quality of rations and medicines during the last two years. They said most of the medications purchased and supplied to the jails by the headquarters are substandard, manufactured by little known companies. Paracetamol, Antacid, Sefradin and Amoxicillin tablets and capsules they receive are nothing but flour, they alleged.

Protesting the poor quality of rations and medicine, prison guards of Dhaka

Central Jail hurled bombs at the house of the IGP two months ago.

THRIVING BRIBERY

The curse of monthly toll collection has brought in a virtual reign of corruption to all the prisons. Jailers are now collecting more bribes from visitors and prisoners. To exact money they threaten the detainees with sending to punishment cells or promise to allow free movement inside the jails.

Instead of stopping smuggling of food, narcotics and other illegal goods into the prisons, jail guards now supply those, including drugs like cannabis and Phensidyl, to prisoners.

Large part of the bribes comes from detainees who want to stay in prison hospitals and to have the patients' diets without actually being hospitalised.

"I had to pay a bribe of Tk 1,500 a week to secure a place to sleep in the jail," Faruq, who was freed recently, told The Daily Star at the main gate of Dhaka Central Jail.

"I also made separate payments to add a little bit of spices to my food and for two mugs of water to bathe," he said, adding the prison authorities did not refund him Tk 7,000 he had submitted when taken in.

Visitors to Dhaka Central Jail have to pay up to Tk 200 each, up from Tk 70 two years ago, to meet a detainee, although the government's charge is only Tk 2. The amount of the bribe varies depending on the type of prison inmate -- special cell prisoner, prisoner staying in jail hospital, under-aged prisoner, newly arrived prisoner, detainee and under-trial prisoner.

The rate also goes up if the visitor fails to furnish details of the person he wants to meet.

"Corruption in jails is nothing new," says a mid-ranking prison official. "It has just increased." If the higher officials are satisfied with monthly tolls, juniors are rewarded with good postings, he said.

WHAT IGP SAYS

IGP Zillur admitted to transferring jailers three to four times. "They are awarded with punishments, promotions and transfers according to rules to ensure quality in prison management."

Denying the charge of taking bribes for transfers, he said, "Why do they pay tolls?" and added, "Let them go to the court and prove it."

On quality of medicine and rations for the prisoners, Rahman just said, "There is an officer from the drug administration on our medicine purchase committee, who looks after the quality."

"Some corrupt jail officers are angry with me as I cut down the representation of prison staff in the food purchase committee and co-opted a civil surgeon, a social welfare officer and representative of the district magistrate in order to reduce malpractice," the IGP argued.

"No previous authorities meted out such punishments as I have done since taking over. In just one year, I reduced the percentage of inmates' involvement in jail crimes from 9 percent in 2002 to 5 percent in 2003. My work has made the inmates happy, so I don't bother negative criticism," he said.

CPB demands

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should have done is to dredge big rivers on a regular basis," the CPB leader maintained.

On flood protection strategy, CPB leader Prof M M Akash said, "As a flood-prone and lower riparian country of the subcontinent, Bangladesh should go for an 'open flood control' system like regular dredging of rivers and interconnecting water bodies to facilitate unhindered flow of flood water."

"But the 'cordon approach' [currently pursued in the country] like building dams and embankments in certain areas would never bring any positive result," the professor observed.

The communist party also asked the government to act immediately to save the water bodies in and around the city from the land grabbers.

Selim lambasted the government for spending crores of taka for beautification of the capital when the city dwellers are suffering from post-flood hazards including the mosquito menace.

The CPB leader claimed the relief provided by the government was not only inadequate, it failed to reach a large number of the flood victims.

The party demanded for continuing the Vulnerable Group Feeding programme until the next harvest season.

CPB President Manjurul Ahsan Khan said Bangladesh should start dialogues with the neighbouring countries immediately to formulate and agree on a regional co-operation on flood control.

Party leaders Ruhin Hossain Prince and Samsuzzaman Selim were also present in the conference.

6-hr hartal

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Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, credited with leading the nation to independence in 1971, was killed, with most of his family members on August 15, 1975.

AL during its tenure in power from 1996 to 2001 used to officially observe the day as the National Mourning Day. The BNP-Jamaat-led coalition government scrapped the day and its official programmes after returning to power in October 2001.

AL central working committee meeting of July 14 with its President Sheikh Hasina in the chair decided to observe hartal on August 15 to protest the government decision.

According to the programme, leaders of AL and its front organisations will lay wreaths at the portrait of the slain leader at the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum in the city at 12:01pm, a minute after the hartal ends. The national flag will be at half-mast at the offices of AL and its front organisations across the country.

Extortionists

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Medical College Hospital (DMCH) at 3:25pm where the on-duty doctor declared him dead.

"Some extortionists, Raja, Sheikh Kamal and Nazel, have been demanding Tk 20 lakh as toll from Abdul Motaleb, owner of the companies, for last one and a half months by phone," Mohammad Chand Miah, Motaleb's father-in-law, told the reporters yesterday.

"They also threatened to kill Motaleb if he refused to pay the toll. Yesterday's murder might be a part of the threat to panic Motaleb," he added.

Meanwhile, Uttara police recovered a decomposed body of a youth aged around 30 from a ditch at Armytek in Moshair on Thursday at 10:40pm. The body was stripped naked and stuffed inside a tin trunk with hands tied back and a rope wrapped around the neck, police inquest said.

Morgue sources said the almost decomposed body suggests that criminals had killed the man a couple of days ago.

Nunu

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threats to the airport, educational institutions and other government offices.

People and vehicles thinned out in the city streets despite the deployment of additional security personnel from the armed police and paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles at important establishments including Hazrat Shahjalal's Shrine, scene of at least two fatal explosions one of which injured British High Commissioner to Bangladesh Anwar Choudhury.

Every visitor to the shrine was scanned with metal detector before Juma prayers yesterday.

President, PM

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She demanded a probe into the death of Azad in Germany and recalled that he had been receiving continuous death threat after the attack on him on February 27 this year.

"In the circumstances, possibility of involvement of the anti-liberation forces in his death cannot be ruled out," she said.

Hasina prayed for the eternal peace of the departed soul and conveyed her sympathy to the members of the bereaved family.



PHOTO: STAR

Activists of International Kathme Nabuat Movement's Khulna unit bring out an anti-Ahmadiyya procession in the southwestern city yesterday.

Bacteria solution

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hazards.

Millions of people, mostly in the rural areas, have developed various symptoms of poisoning from drinking arsenic-contaminated water from tubewells for decades.

The study by Farhana Islam, supervised by other researchers, showed the special group of bacteria 'gains energy by respiring (breathing), using the metal iron and arsenic containing minerals in the earth's sediments'.

The young scientist said, "Our results show that these are the special anaerobic bacteria, as they don't need any oxygen to support their growth. They are known as metal-reducing bacteria. We are very interested in iron-reducing bacteria that use iron as their growth substrate, and can also use arsenic when the iron is used up."

The bacteria cause changes in the mineral structure of the sediments, leading to release of arsenic into groundwater, the study says.

Farhana, who studies in the Department of Earth Sciences and Williamson Research Centre for Molecular Environmental Science at the University of Manchester, told The Daily Star, "We are looking at how these processes of breaking down the mineral can

be reversed so that the groundwater is safe to drink."

She elaborated, "With our results, we found that maximum amount of arsenic was released from contaminated sediment into groundwater in the absence of oxygen."

There were several hypotheses concerning the release of arsenic into the groundwater systems of West Bengal in India, where the researchers worked. Some suggested a role for aerobic bacteria (arsenopyrite oxidation), some suggested a role for metal-reducing bacteria while others considered the problem to be driven by geochemistry.

The scientists from Manchester University conducted experiments in their laboratory with sediments collected directly from an area of West Bengal affected by arsenic.

"We were the first group to combine geochemical, mineralogical and microbiological/molecular biology techniques to study this system, and have presented the first direct evidence to support a role for metal-reducing bacteria in arsenic release from the sediments. The organisms identified as playing a key role are iron reducing bacteria that can attack arsenic once they have exhausted iron as a growth element," Farhana explained.

Sylhet bomb blasts

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quarters has transferred the cases to the CID, he however said the CID was yet to receive the docket.

Asked then what were they doing in Sylhet, CID officers said they are collecting information.

When The Daily Star inquired Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police, Sylhet Range Ali Imam Chowdhury about the progress made in the nearly one-week investigations into the three cases, he refrained from making any comment, saying the cases had been handed over to the CID.

On the other hand, a CID official, requesting not to be named, said, "There is no complications here. It is obvious that the cases would be transferred to the CID and a CID official would be assigned with the investigations. But police are likely to continue the probe until a CID officer is given the task."

Police are trying to evade their responsibility, although the CID are yet

to receive the cases officially, he added.

The relation between police and Munshi Atique has reportedly turned very sour over the issue.

Atique declined to comment on the bitter ties. As sources said officers concerned are avoiding making any statement on the cases as police and CID officials are at loggerheads over them.

As the CID were yet to begin the probe, despite order from the police headquarters, Kotwali police produced Nunu Mia, arrested in connection to Saturday's grenade blast at AL meeting venue at Taltala, before a court and sought remand.

Nunu Mia, an AL leader of the northeastern city, was flown to the capital yesterday to be quizzed by the Joint Interrogation Cell.

Security, meanwhile, has been beefed up in Sylhet, following Thursday night's bomb threat on local radio station. Locals are passing the days in utter panic and insecurity.

Typhoon kills 115

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ate reports of casualties or major damage.

Charley's center was 75 miles west of Key West at 9 a.m. and was expected to hit the Tampa Bay area later in the day, dumping heavy rain and possibly spawning sporadic tornadoes.

In northwest Tampa, an evacuation shelter at Sickles High School was full to its 500 capacity by 8 a.m. Windows had been reinforced with screens and tarps to prepare for the storm.

"I'm scared that we're going to go home and nothing is going to be there," 20-year-old Amanda Kellogg said as she played blackjack with four friends, their suitcases, bedding and other possessions piled beside them.

About 6.5 million of Florida's 17 million residents were in Charley's projected path, according to the Census Bureau.

At dawn Friday in Key West, fisherman Manuel Garcia was trying to secure his boss's fishing boat, the Cowboy III, in the Stock Island marina, where heavy surf was pushing the vessel against a cement barrier.

"If the water comes up, I can do nothing," he said, smoking a thick cigar.

The storm surge in the Tampa area could reach up to 16 feet if Charley hits at 120 mph, making it a major hurricane at Category 3 strength, state meteorologist Ben Nelson said.

"It does have the potential of devastating impact. ... This is a scary, scary thing," said Gov. Jeb Bush, who has declared an emergency.

On Thursday, Tropical Storm Bonnie came ashore in the Florida Panhandle and moved north. Three people, including a child, were killed and 25 injured Friday when a tornado spun out of its remnants and hit a North Carolina trailer park.

Ahead of Charley on Friday morning, the weather at the St. Petersburg/Clearwater International Airport was calm, said Jeff Clauss, an airport spokesman.

About 1.9 million people from the Florida Keys north through the west coast have been advised to evacuate, although only 1.1 million to 1.5 million were expected to do so before the storm hits, said Kristy Campbell, spokeswoman at the state emergency management center.

"In many areas, people are still leaving," Campbell said Friday.

Charley made landfall on Cuba's main island shortly after midnight near the southern town of Batabano, then passed just west of downtown Havana, population 2.2 million, about two hours later.

Authorities reported relatively minor damage, including ripped roofs, broken windows and downed trees, though gusts in some areas reached up to 125 mph.

It continued moving north-northwest near 18 mph. Hurricane force winds extended outward 30 miles from the eye; tropical storm force winds went out 125 miles.

All the west coast of Florida's peninsula was under a hurricane warning, as was the lower Florida Keys. Tropical storm watches and warnings extended from the middle Keys to Cape Fear, N.C.

Most of the evacuations were in the counties of Hillsborough, which contains Tampa, and Pinellas, a peninsula that contains St. Petersburg. All residents of MacDill Air Force Base, on another peninsula in Tampa Bay, were ordered out with only essential personnel remaining. MacDill is home to US Central Command, the nerve center of the war in Iraq.

Iraqi militants threaten to kill British hostage

REUTERS, Basra

Iraqi militants kidnapped a British journalist in the southern city of Basra and threatened to kill him if a US assault on the Shi'ite holy city of Najaf was not halted in 24 hours, witnesses and a video tape showed yesterday.

The witnesses said gunmen seized the journalist from a hotel in mainly Shi'ite Basra. Hours later a video tape released in the city showed a hooded gunman standing next to the journalist and threatening to kill him if the attack on Najaf was not stopped.

AFP says, about 20 masked gunmen, some wearing police uniform, stormed into the Al-Diyafa hotel at about 11:00 pm (local time).

Another hotel employee at the front desk said the journalist was registered as "James Andrew working for the Sunday Telegraph."

A British military spokesman in Basra would not confirm the kidnapping saying "we are working with the local authorities to establish the facts."

The incident comes one day after a shadowy Shi'ite group calling itself Abu al-Abbas warned that it would kill all those cooperating with British troops in apparent retaliation for the US-led assault on Najaf to the north.

"We will kill everyone working with British troops including contractors, interpreters and others," said a statement from the group received by AFP.

Ahmadiyya

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Square where the local chapter of IKNMB organised the rally after the Juma prayers with IKNMB Ameer Moulana Abu Saleh in the chair.

Speakers at the rally said Ahmadiyyas had been declared non-Muslims in at least 42 countries and demanded of the government to amend the constitution and follow suit or face dire consequences.

After the meeting, the Islamist zealots coming from the city and the neighbouring districts started marching towards the Ahmadiyya complex, but were intercepted by security forces at Mollapota crossroads in Sonadanga.

Movement of all modes of vehicles including bicycles was prohibited at the crossroads as well as on Sher-e-Bangla Road, Gallamari Road and all lanes and bylanes in Nirala, cutting off road communication between Khulna and Sathkira districts.

The mob dispersed at 8:20pm reportedly after the IKNMB leaders had arrived at some sort of understanding with the law enforcing agencies and local administration, the contents of which could not be known immediately.

Olympics opening

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year ban, were visited in hospital by Olympic officials who ordered them to appear at a disciplinary hearing on Friday afternoon just hours before the start of the Games.

"There will be an announcement from the hospital shortly as to whether their health will permit them to attend," said Manolis Kolimbadis of the Greek Olympic team.

"At this moment it is too early to say (if they'll compete). They have splinters in their arms and serious bruising on their legs. But they are in good health, they don't have any serious problems," he added.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) was left in a state of confusion by the bewildering sequence of events.

One IOC member, requesting anonymity, said: "There is a great deal of confusion. We know there was an accident last night but people are wondering what actually happened. There is suspicion and confusion and disappointment."

"We don't know what to believe. A shadow has been cast over the whole thing."

The news hit Greece like a thunderbolt from the gods.

People burst into tears on hearing what happened as Greece was all set to take centre stage with the launch of Athens 2004 before a television audience of billions around the world.

To some, it looked like hubris to the fiercely proud Greeks.

"Everyone was talking about how great it all is, how beautiful the city and the stadiums are and of course now this happens. It's like they've put a curse on us," said IT technician Manolis Kalatzis.

Morning television and radio shows discussed nothing but the overnight drama in tones ranging from the sympathetic to the paranoid.

Newspaper Ethnos called to the athletes on its front page to "Tell Us the

Truth - you owe it to all Greeks to prove you are clean"

Kenteris, the only man to win the Olympic, world and European 200 metre titles, is a national hero in Greece but doping rumours, due in part to his rare appearances, have constantly dogged the sprinter known as "Greece Lightning."

His training partner Thanou grabbed her own Olympic headlines by finishing runner-up to Marion Jones in the women's 100 metres at the Sydney Olympics.

The pair were absent from the athletes' village when Olympic officials arrived on Thursday to conduct drugs tests. Greek officials blamed a mix-up over their non-appearance.

A missed drugs appointment is normally treated as a failed test and leads to immediate suspension from competition.

The drama was a bitter blow for Greece, bombarded by years with criticism for construction chaos, budget overruns and security concerns.

The ability of this nation of 10 million people to stage the Olympics was constantly called into question.

But everything fell into place at the very last moment.

Organisers were widely praised for finally transforming Athens into a city fit to host the greatest sporting show on earth and welcome the Games back to their spiritual homeland.

Athenians gave the Olympic torch a tumultuous reception on Thursday night when the emotional symbol of sport's healing power reached the Acropolis after journeying across five continents.

Nine-times Olympic gold medallist Carl Lewis handed the flame to Greek high jumper Niki Bakogianni, a silver medallist at Atlanta in 1996, who lit a cauldron amid the 2,500-year-old temples on the hill overlooking Athens.

Lewis had carried the torch, modelled like an olive leaf, to the steps of the Acropolis, cheered on by thousands of Athenians and tourists. Some waved small Greek flags.

"Tonight the flame illuminates the Acropolis, the ultimate symbol of Greece and Greek civilisation," said Games chief organiser Gianna Angelopoulos.

Int'l probe

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AAMS Arefin Siddique demanded an international probe into Azad's death.

"We want to know how Azad passed away and we hope the German government will give us the information," he said while talking to this correspondent at Azad's residence.

The writer's wife Latifa Kohinoor and other family members and relatives also demanded an international investigation into his death.

Latifa alleged that 'conspirators' killed him abroad after they failed to kill him in the country.

Rashed Khan Menon, president of the Workers' Party of Bangladesh, resented that the Bangladesh embassy in Germany failed to inform Azad's family in time the news of his death.

"Islamic fanatics involved in the attack on Azad in February last might have a hand behind his death," Menon said.

Mujahidul Islam Selim, general secretary of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, said fundamentalists are attacking freethinking writers one after another as the government has not taken effective steps to check the rise of fanatic forces in the country.

He paid tributes to Azad saying he was an asset to the nation.

Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), student wing of the Awami League; Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal-backed BCL and Bangladesh Chhatra Maitree jointly demanded an international probe into the death of Azad.

leaving the Imam Ali shrine in the city of Najaf, Iraq's Interior Minister Falah al-Naqib said yesterday.

"Sayed Moqtada will not be touched if he leaves the shrine peacefully. A truce has been in force since last night," Naqib told Reuters.

AFP adds: Sadr issued a list of conditions for an end to more than a week of deadly clashes a spokesman said yesterday.

The conditions were spelled out at a news conference at a hotel in Najaf by Sheikh Ali Sumeisim.

If all multinational forces, Iraqi police and soldiers leave Najaf and the Marjavia, or religious authority, agrees to take responsibility for the city, "the Mehdi Army would pull out from Najaf," Sumeisim said.

All basic services must be restored, Sadr's Mehdi Army recognised as an ideological movement and its members allowed to carry weapons for self-defence, Sumeisim continued.

Those jailed for supporting the resistance, all imprisoned clerics and women must also be released from prison, the spokesman added.

based on the latest population data, Kerry could reclaim every Gore state and still be 10 electoral votes short of the coveted 270.

Quoting public polls, Kerry aides say their boss is leading Bush, often narrowly, in 24 states plus the District of Columbia for a total of 316 electoral votes. They say Bush's presidency is hanging by a thread. "This is not a good place for the incumbent to be," said Kerry pollster Mark Mellman.

That may be true, but some Democrats would rather not hear about raised expectations.

"You always have to strike a balance between recognizing a good moment and setting the bar so high that in a couple of weeks, particularly after the Republican convention, you've created an image that you've lost momentum," said Greg Haas, a Democratic strategist in Ohio who advises Columbus Mayor Michael Coleman.

Warming up for the GOP convention, Bush has accused Kerry of sending "mixed signals" on Iraq (news - web sites) and Cheney has mocked the Democrat for supporting a "more sensitive" war on terror.

Bush's acceptance speech will be laced with policy initiatives, some of them new, in a bid to persuade voters that he has a second-term agenda for the economy, health care and other issues that Democrats consider their own.

Just as Kerry convinced some voters that he's tough enough to lead the nation at war, Bush hopes to show the electorate that he's capable of directing the nation back to peace and prosperity.

Kerry takes leads

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their convention and Election Day, challengers always lose ground," said Bush strategist Matthew Dowd.

For now, it's the incumbent who has to make up ground.

If public polls and pundits are right, Florida, Michigan, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Oregon and 15 others states plus the District of Columbia are in Kerry's column or leaning his way with 269 electoral votes one short of the presidency.

But it's not nearly that simple.

Florida still appears to be a tossup state, with Kerry leading by only a few points in private Democratic polling.

In Pennsylvania, a preponderance of polling gives Kerry an edge, but Bush isn't giving up on the state that he has visited 31 times, his favorite destination among the 50. In fact, he has intensified his television advertising in Pennsylvania and five other states: Florida, Ohio, Nevada, New Mexico and Wisconsin.

Mark them down. They may be the most important states of the campaign.

Florida and Ohio, the latter with 20 electoral votes, offer Kerry his best chance of winning big states that went Republican in 2000. Nevada, with just five votes, may be Kerry's next ripest GOP target.

Since his first day in office, Pennsylvania has been No. 1 on Bush's wish-list of states won by Al Gore in 2000. If he can't win the Keystone State, the president would turn to New Mexico and Wisconsin, with a combined 15 electoral votes that went to Gore.

Because of reapportionment, which reallocated state electoral votes