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SYLHET BLASTS

Clueless intelligence agencies irk govt

JULFIKAR ALI MANIK

The government sounded worried about failures of high-profile intelligence agencies to trace the masterminds of bomb blasts that killed at least 10 people and injured scores of others in Sylhet since January 12.

Exasperated by the apparent intelligence failures that grabbed the media spotlight, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia instructed State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfuzzaman Babar to find the reasons of the failures in probes.

Babar on an instruction from Khaleda convened an emergency meeting with top officials of police, National Security Intelligence (NSI), Criminal Investigation Department (CID), Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) at his office on Saturday

where he expressed disappointment at the issue.

Mystery surrounds the bomb blasts at Hazrat Shahjalal Shrine on January 12 that killed five people and a grenade blast on May 21 that killed three people and injured 75 others, including Bangladesh-born British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury in the northeastern holy city.

"Sylhet blasts were the focus of the meeting, but there were some other issues as well," Babar told The Daily Star last night, adding the investigators are facing a host of problems in different stages of investigation. "I hope the criminals behind the blasts would be netted."

A source in the meeting quoted the state minister as asking officials at the hourlong meeting: "Where is the problem? Why nothing comes out of the probes?"

"Investigators are speculating instead of giving specific information," he said, asking for a list of people who carried out the attacks. "Why do the probes fizzle out although all agencies are working together?"

The officials blamed the intelligence failures on the safe escape of criminals, who they said could not be arrested because of misleading information: "We cannot arrest anyone only on suspicion or assumption," an official told the meeting.

Babar emphasised joint efforts of the four agencies such as CID, NSI, DGFI and Rab and said: "The investigation officers will be mainly responsible but the four agencies must work seriously to assist them in a quick investigation."

Babar asked the top brass to task one official from each agency with

investigation into the August 5 twin theatre blasts that killed a street boy and a car bomb blast at a meeting venue of Awami League 47 hours later that left an AL leader dead.

The CID was tasked with a probe of the three blasts, but DGFI, NSI and Rab would investigate separately to assist the CID often blamed for the failure to trace the operatives of sensational bomb blasts.

An investigator claims that intelligence agencies are close to tracking down the mastermind behind the August 5 blasts at Monica and Rangmahal cinema halls as two suspected carriers of bombs -- Soleman and Anwar -- were caught by locals and handed over to the police.

But the official doubted any success of the investigations into other blasts as none of the carriers was arrested.



Weavers put handloom machines back in place at Belkuchi in Munshiganj district yesterday after recession of floodwaters. The monsoon deluge has hit thousands of weavers hard.

Nation mourns Bangabandhu

9 injured in Barisal in BNP attacks

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The pavement in front of Bangabandhu Bhaban on Dhanmondi Road No. 32 (old) was overlaid with wreaths and bouquets yesterday as hundreds of mourners wearing black badges and carrying black flags gathered there to show respect to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, founder father of the nation.

Soon after the six-hour hartal enforced by main opposition Awami League (AL) had ended at noon, people from all walks of life, including AL leaders and workers, thronged in front of the historical house to pay homage to the slain leader on his 29th death anniversary.

At 12:31pm, Sheikh Hasina, AL president and the eldest daughter of Bangabandhu, placed wreaths and stood in solemn silence for a while in front of her father's portrait, while thousands of people waited in long queues to follow her suit.

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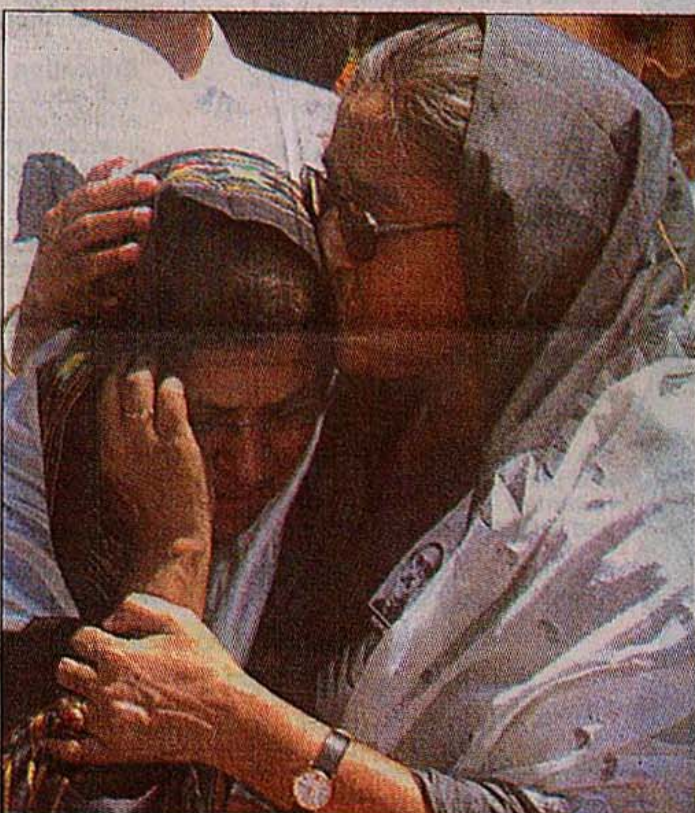


PHOTO: STAR

Opposition Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina, right, kisses her younger sister Sheikh Rehana as Rehana breaks down yesterday when they went to place a wreath at the family graveyard in Banani on the occasion of the 29th death anniversary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

6 more infants die from pneumonia

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Pneumonia continues to be a leading cause of illness for the infants in most of the flood shelters as six more died of the disease and 846 were infected yesterday.

Doctors treating the affected infants at different medical camps last week have described the outbreak of the disease as alarming.

In the last two weeks, 52 infants died of pneumonia largely caused by two types of bacteria that attack and cause inflammation of the lung. Characterised by cough and fast laborious breathing, pneumonia, an infection of the respiratory tract mostly in infants, or infection of the lower part of the lungs, has infected 11,516 infants in the flood shelters since August 1.

Diarrhoea outbreak has meanwhile continued to spread in the flood-affected areas. The health directorate said one more patient died yesterday of the water-borne disease and 5,365 more were affected. About 1.64 lakh people were affected by the disease since July 12.

The health directorate said 2,237

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Saifur trashes flood damage estimates as guesswork

Says govt will jointly make assessment with donors

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman yesterday dismissed the flood-damage estimates of the UN and others as 'mere guesswork' and said the government does not subscribe to these estimates, as it has not assessed the damage.

"We're not with them. These are all guesses on flood losses. We'll jointly assess the damage with the donors once floodwaters recede completely and seek assistance for post-flood rehabilitation," Saifur told reporters after a meeting on simplification of project-formulation procedure at the National Economic Council office in Dhaka.

The UN and the government on Thursday put the flood damage estimates in the region of \$7 billion. The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), an independent civil society think-tank, initially estimated the damage figure at \$2 to 2.5 billion. The UN, CPD and the government also fought a war of words and numbers over the contradicting damage estimates.

Asked about the actual damage figure, Saifur said, "Floodwaters are yet to subside and in many places the water is even rising. The government will send its teams to the flood-affected areas alongside the ones of the donors. They will assess the damage at the field level, which will be the government's estimate on the

flood damage."

"Of course, I agree with you..." he told reporters when asked if the UN aid appeal based on the 'exaggerated' figure will damage Bangladesh's image before the eyes of the international community.

Saifur slammed the UN appeal on the sidelines of the meeting and said the government did not ask them to beg on behalf of the country, according to meeting sources. The country's image will suffer for the next 20 years because of the appeal, he was quoted as observing.

Immediately after the raging monsoon deluge submerged most of the country, the government had said it would not seek relief assistance.

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Bigots to keep laying siege to Ahmadiyya mosques

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Khatme Nabuwat Andolon Parishad Bangladesh (KNAPB) yesterday said they will keep on laying siege to Ahmadiyya mosques across the country as long as the Ahmadiyyas identify their place of worship as a mosque.

KNAPB in a press conference in the city yesterday voiced the vow.

"As the Ahmadiyya community has no right to claim themselves to be Muslims then how dare they post a signboard reading mosque in front of their place of worship," said Abdul Khaliq while addressing the press conference.

KNAPB leaders once again demanded the government declare the Ahmadiyya community non-Muslims because they do not accept Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) as the last prophet.

KNAPB would make an issue of it in the next general election if the government does not meet the demand.

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MK Anwar urges PM to probe GD filed against him

UNB, Dhaka

Agriculture Minister MK Anwar yesterday requested Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to take measures through investigation into the allegations brought against him by father of a Dhaka City ward commissioner.

In a letter to the PM, the agriculture minister said that a general diary (GD) filed against him by ABM Wadudul Huq should be properly investigated "to ensure accountability and transparency of the government," according to a reliable source.

"Giving the countrymen the correct information through an inquiry into the allegations is all the more necessary to keep up the

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Mercury goes up in Olympics pool

AFP, Athens

The duel in the pool between Australia and the United States swim teams took centre-stage at the Olympics Sunday as organisers played down fresh concerns over thousands of unsold tickets and security.

Twelve more gold medals in 24 events were up for grabs on day two of the world's biggest sporting event, with all eyes on the unfolding battle between swimmers from Australia and the United States.

Australia stole an early march on their American rivals on Saturday's opening day, superstar Ian Thorpe and their women's relay team giving them two golds to the one earned by US sensation Michael Phelps.

The Australian women's world-record breaking victory in the 4x100m freestyle relay was the biggest upset of the night, with the Americans failing to win gold for the first time since 1988.

On Sunday, the US men's 4x100m team gets the chance to avenge that

defeat when they try to wrest back the title that they lost to the Australians for the first time ever in Sydney four years ago.

US officials confirmed that Phelps had been drafted in to the relay team for Sunday night's 8.55pm (1755 GMT) final in a sign of the Americans' determination to regain their crown.

Phelps' participation opens the door to him challenging for a record eight gold medals in Athens, a quest that has generated huge excitement in the swimming competition.

Weightlifter Nurcan Taylan became the first Turkish woman to win an Olympic gold medal on Saturday yet her feat was achieved in a near-empty stadium.

And on Sunday tennis stars Venus Williams and Andy Roddick used to playing to packed courts, both recorded straight sets victories in their opening Olympic matches against a backdrop of vacant stands.

US Open champion Roddick was not bothered by the thousands of

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Hartal enforced in times of flood distress

PM blasts opposition for 'anarchic activities'

UNB, Patuakhali

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday criticised the opposition for perpetrating "anarchic activities" instead of helping people in times of distress inflicted by severe floods.

Without naming Awami League, she deplored they are enforcing hartal when people in most parts of the country are smarting under the worst flooding in recent times.

She observed they (opposition) do not have any positive programme and are trying to hinder the development process. "They did not do any

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DHAKA-10 BY-POLLS Mannan appeals to HC to vacate stay order

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh (BDB) leader major (ret'd) Abdul Mannan yesterday appealed to the High Court to vacate the stay order on his petition filed with the Election Commission (EC) challenging the validity of the Dhaka-10 by-polls.

Mannan's counsel MK Rahman yesterday filed the appeal to a division bench comprising Justice Abdul Wahab Mia and Zenat Ara.

Mannan, BDB candidate of the by-polls, on July 4 lodged the petition with the EC challenging the legality of the July 1 by-polls, in

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India's Independence Day rally bombed

School children among 22 killed in blasts

REUTERS, Guwahati

Separatist rebels killed 22 people, many of them school children, in India yesterday and wounded dozens in bomb and grenade attacks on independence day ceremonies in the troubled northeast and disputed Kashmir.

The children aged between 10 and 14 years were taking part in a parade in a far-off corner of insurgency-racked oil- and tea-producing state of Assam when a powerful bomb ripped through a college ground, police said.

Several guerrilla groups in the northeast which shares borders with China, Myanmar and Bhutan had called for a boycott of the independence ceremonies, saying it was a black day.

Tens of thousands of soldiers were placed on alert across the country and authorities closed off air space over New Delhi, where Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made a public speech, to ward off possible attacks during the celebrations. A witness said most of the bodies of the children were burned beyond recognition in the blast in Dhemaji town, 217 miles from Guwahati, Assam's commercial center.

"The bomb exploded under the feet of the children. There is blood and human flesh all over the ground," said school teacher Jiban Saikia.

Seven women were among the dead, including teachers and moth-

ers who had come to watch the children participate in the march-past.

India's northeast is home to dozens of insurgent groups, some demanding more autonomy and others secession. Most of them accuse New Delhi of plundering the region's rich resources and flooding it with outsiders.

"It was a most cowardly thing to do," Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi told local television stations, placing the blame on the powerful United Liberation Front of Assam.

Separatist militants also struck in Kashmir, lobbing a grenade into a school in Baramulla district and wounding 15 people who had gathered for the independence day ceremonies, police said.

In New Delhi, Singh vowed to carry forward peace efforts with Pakistan and said New Delhi wanted results from the dialogue that began this year.

"We have always been in favor of a purposive bilateral dialogue with Pakistan to resolve all outstanding issues," Singh said, referring to concern in Islamabad that India could be dragging its feet in the talks on the main dispute over Kashmir.

New Delhi regards the whole of Muslim-majority Kashmir as an integral part of the country, and blames Pakistan for stoking the revolt there that has killed thousands of people.

Pakistan denies involvement in the rebellion and seeks a plebiscite

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