

N Korea shuns atomic talks

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea has ruled out attending proposed six-way working-level talks on its nuclear arms programmes and has questioned the entire negotiating process, blaming hostile U.S. policy for Pyongyang's tougher stance.

But a Chinese analyst and South Korean officials saw a large measure of pre-talks bluster in the comments from a North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman and predicted the talks would go ahead before the end of September. Pyongyang has in the past raised the rhetorical volume before attending talks or making a concession.

The working-level talks had been expected last week but failed to materialise, leading diplomats to suggest North Korea could be seeking to drag out the process as the U.S. presidential election in November approaches.

"The U.S. has destroyed itself the foundation for the talks, making it impossible for the DPRK to go to the forthcoming meeting of the working group," the spokesman said in comments published by the official KCNA newsagency on Monday.

DPRK is short for the North's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

"It is clear that there would be nothing to expect even if the DPRK sits at the negotiating table with the U.S. under the present situation," the spokesman said.

"Now that the process of the six-party talks is retracting from the desired direction due to the U.S. attitude and nothing can be expected from the next round of the talks, it is clear such talks for the form's sake would be helpful to no one."

He did not explicitly rule out attending the full talks.

IT'S MERELY POSTURING

The spokesman pointed to the airlift last month of more than 460 North Korean refugees to the South from Southeast Asia, recent human rights legislation in the United States and what he described as U.S. comments that a military option to solve the crisis was not ruled out.

Bangladeshi boy killed in London road mishap

UNB, London

A Bangladeshi boy was killed and 10 others were injured in a road accident near Hilton Service Centre on their way to sea resort town of Bonmouth for a short training of Bangalee youth workers.

Azhar Ali Shamim, 15, died on the spot. Son of Noor Ali alias Maznu Mia, Azhar hailed from Kamula village in Balaganj upazila of Sylhet.

The injured are Naimuddin, Abdul Sabbir, Tareq Hossain, Zubair Hossain, Anwar Ali, Mukim Kalim and Shah Alam and course officials Ahad, Koyes Chowdhury and Mostaq Ahmed. They are undergoing treatment at Hillingdon and West Middlesex hospitals.

According to a delayed report, the accident took place on Friday night when the minibus carrying them skidded off the road as the driver lost control over the steering. The driver was taken to police custody.

Sylhet blasts

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"We found him carrying a yellow bag before the blast," one witness was quoted as saying. The unexploded bomb found at Abakash and the one that exploded at Rangmahal were kept in similar bags, he reportedly said.

Witnesses to the Rangmahal blast said they found Anwar dropping a bomb, which exploded immediately.

But they did not confess to their involvement in the blasts even 12 days into their arrest during their treatment at MAG Osmany Medical College Hospital in Sylhet under police custody.

Neither Sylhet Kotwali police nor the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), who are now probing the case, sought their remand during the period.

But they decided to bring the two to the capital for interrogation by the JIC as the higher authorities blasted them for failure to make any headway in the probe, sources mentioned.

Talking to The Daily Star, newly-appointed Officer-in-Charge of Sylhet Kotwali Police Station Syed Mahbub Rahman however said, "They (Soleman and Anwar) have been sent to Combined Military Hospital in Dhaka for better treatment as their condition deteriorated. Soleman has gangrene in his right leg and Anwar has gangrene in his hand."

"We hope to extract from them leads to the blasts and track down people behind the incidents," he added.

Two other arrestees -- Masum and Motaheb -- are now in jail.

Kotwali police in Sylhet said all listed criminals went into hiding as 10 police teams started raiding different parts of the city Sunday night.

BANGABANDHU MAZAR

Hasina slams govt for suspending 15 staff

UNB, Gopalganj

Opposition leader Sheikh Hasina yesterday slammed the government for suspending 15 officials and employees of Bangabandhu Mazar Complex and warned it of dire consequences.

"The prime minister has suspended the officials and employees of the complex out of vengeance although she herself has spent crores of taka for erecting the mazar of Ziaur Rahman," she said.

Hasina, also the Awami League (AL) president, was addressing a discussion meeting marking the 29th death anniversary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family members at Tungipara in the afternoon.

"The previous Awami League government had declared August 15 a national mourning day and a public holiday, but Khaleda-Nizami government cancelled it," she said.

Hasina said Ziaur Rahman rewarded the killers of Bangabandhu with jobs and his wife, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, rewarded the condemned killers again with jobs.

Referring to Khaleda's remarks on proclamation of independence, Hasina said Khaleda Zia had made a false statement on the date of proclamation of independence in parliament, violating the constitution. "If Awami League is voted to power again, she will be put on trial," Hasina said.

Chaired by AL leader Amir Hossain Amu, the meeting was addressed, among others, by Abdul Jalil MP, Suranjit Sengupta MP, Motia Chowdhury, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim MP and Saber Hossain Chowdhury.

Hasina arrived here from Dhaka at noon and placed wreaths at the mazar of Bangabandhu. She then offered fateha and attended a milad.

Two Dhaka roads

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The roads -- from Kalabagan crossing to Azimpur and from Science Laboratory to College Road (next to Bangabazar) via Jatiya Press Club -- will remain open to rickshaws until next month, a top DTCB official said yesterday.

DTCB Chairman and Dhaka City Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka recently postponed the decision, the official said requesting anonymity. The World Bank officials have asked to set a fresh date to make the roads off-limit to rickshaws, he added.

The DTCB chairman was not available for comment as he is now on a visit to London.

Under a World Bank-funded project aiming to ease traffic congestion in Dhaka city by phasing out slow-moving vehicles, the DTCB earlier decided to make six other Dhaka roads off-limit to rickshaws in phases by 2006.

Private infrastructure

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Bangladesh Bank will closely monitor project selection and a deputy governor of the central bank will sit on the committee.

Private investors will bear all project liabilities and the government will not give any guarantee against the projects.

A project can float a maximum of 30 percent of its shares in the local capital market two years into commercial operations.

The approved guidelines will have an exit clause, allowing the private investors in big projects to hand over the shares to new investors five to seven years after commercial operations. In case of small projects, the shares can be transferred after two years.

A Private Infrastructure Committee, headed by the principal secretary to the prime minister, will primarily select projects and help in the implementation process.

The line ministry will approve private infrastructure investment projects worth \$5 million and the cabinet committee will clear projects costing beyond the amount.

Central bonded

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The council recommended creation of central bonded warehouses on foreign investment initially in Dhaka and Chittagong export processing zones at private initiatives to cut lead-time and make the textile industry competitive in the duty- and quota-free era.

It also suggested floating a Tk 3,000 crore special fund for the investors in the textile sector at 7 percent interest rate.

Meeting sources said the council came up with detailed recommendations for the garment industry but the recommendations for the textile sector were few and not detailed. The committee asked the council to incorporate views of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association and Bangladesh Textile Mills Association in the fresh recommendations making sure that interests of either side are not hurt.

It also told the council to spell out possible fallout the central bonded warehouses would have on the textile units.

DoE top shot suspended

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DoE, has been suspended temporarily from services.

Abdus Sobhan was tasked with responsibilities of Administration, Development and Planning. He was also the National Project Director (NPD) of UNDP-funded Coastal and Wetland Bio-diversity Management Project (CWBMP).

The suspension notification stated that the allegations against Abdus Sobhan clearly fall under the specific articles of the Public Servant (Discipline and Appeal) Act 1985.

Official sources said the removal orders came after UNDP lodged complaints with the concerned ministries, including finance and environment ministries.

The UNDP that provided Tk 34 crore for the 7-year project, lately halted the disbursement of fund in the face of allegations of massive financial irregularities as well as corruption especially in recruitment.

In the wake of UNDP action, the Economic Relations Division (ERD) of the finance and planning ministry instructed the authorities concerned to go for immediate action against NPD Abdus Sobhan. The finance ministry also apprised the prime minister of the situation.

The Ministry of Environment following prime ministerial instructions suspended Abdus Sobhan and wrapped up necessary formalities to initiate investigation and other departmental proceedings.

"An investigation into allegations

against Abdus Sobhan will soon be underway," said a high official of the environment ministry.

Officials at the Ministry of Environment and DoE said Abdus Sobhan had always maintained a close contact with both the governments of Awami League and current BNP-Jamaat coalition.

He, however, emerged most influential during Shahjahan Siraj's stint as the environment minister.

Shahjahan Siraj despite repeated objections from high officials of the ministry gave him the responsibilities of Director of technical, administration, development and planning and made him NPD of the UNDP-funded project.

Sources in the ministry and UNDP said Abdus Sobhan was involved in leaking questions of recruitment test of the CWBMP project to have his favoured men recruited.

A senior official of the environment ministry seeking anonymity said the NPD intentionally issued letters for the viva-voce with very marginal time in hand for the candidates. And most of the people, who passed the written examination, could not appear in the viva-voce on June 4 as they received the letters well after the examination date.

When contacted, Abdus Sobhan declined to comment saying that he had not yet received papers conveying specific allegation against him.

"I've only received the suspension letter. I can't make any comment before I get the charges against me," he added.

96,000 VGF cards

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Kamal Imbe Yusuf, food and disaster management minister, at his office and submitted the plans and programme.

According to the plans, WFP would provide 1.68 lakh tonnes of wheat or rice, 11,460 tonnes of biscuits, 3,615 tonnes of blended food, 4,000 tonnes of pulses, 3,000 tonnes of vegetable oils and 500 tonnes of salt.

Under the programme, 33 lakh people will have immediate relief through non-governmental organisations (NGOs). One kg rice, 150 gram biscuits, 0.25 kg pulse, 0.15 litre vegetable oil and 0.025 kg salt have been earmarked for each of those people a day for 15 days.

Fifty lakh people or 10 lakh households would get general food ration of 30 kg wheat or rice a month under Vulnerable Group Rehabilitation (VGR) and Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programmes.

Children numbering 1.80 lakh from 6 to 36 months of age and 1.20 lakh pregnant and nursing women will get 80gm blended food every day from September to December.

Eight lakh primary school children will get 75gm biscuit a day from September to December this year through Department of Primary Education and NGOs.

Under the total VGF programme, the government would provide 10 kg rice to each of 30 lakh flood affected families while the WFP would give 30 kg of rice to 10 lakh families.

The WFP officials at yesterday's meeting also discussed the co-ordination between the government and WFP food assistance programme. Food and disaster management ministry decided to run the VGF programme on alternative basis.

Sources said disaster management

No fresh floods

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"The monsoon weather system changes frequently and it is hard to predict rains. We don't see any possibility of heavy rains in five days in Bangladesh," said Arzumand Habib, deputy director of the Meteorological Department.

BADC runs dry

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bush working at their fields and seed-beds," said an agriculture economist.

"There are enough seeds in the market as farmers of the areas that were not flooded grew seeds and are now selling them to the flood-hit farmers," he added.

The BADC now has 36,000 tonnes of seeds of boro paddy, wheat, maize and mashkolai pulses for distribution and plans to import 100 tonnes of maize seeds from Thailand and India by next month.

The authorities have to reach seeds and fertilisers to the target people in time and this is really a tough job, said Quazi Shahabuddin, director general of the BIDS.

"Whatever we want to give the farmers, we should give them now," he added.

The BADC chairman however thinks the floods have not damaged aman crop fully as there is still time for cultivation of its late variety. "Loss of aman could be covered by bumper production of boro as submerged lands gathered huge silt during the flood," he said.

Dr Asaduzzaman of the BIDS said

China's gold

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medals, with three silvers and two bronze, while Australia has won nine.

Zhu, 19, set a new world record of 702.7 points in the men's 10m air rifle gold, shading compatriot Li Jie for China's third gold medal of the shooting competition.

Chen then beat North Korea's Ri Song-Hui in the women's 58kg category of the weightlifting.

China can also look forward to more golden performances in the pool on Monday evening when 17-year-old world champions Lao Lishi and Li Ting compete in the women's synchronised platform diving event.

While the teenage wonders are regarded as virtual certainties to take gold, compatriots Peng Bo and Wang Kenan are also a chance to retain China's Olympic title in the men's synchronised springboard.

In more good news for China as they look to maintain their status as the strongest Olympic nation in the world behind the United States and Russia, their three top-seeded women's shuttlers made it into the semifinals of the singles badminton.

In another ruthless display, world number one and top seed Gong Ruina dropped just six points in defeating Taipei's Cheng Shao-Chieh, and will now play Dutch fourth seed Mia Audina.

Reigning world champion and tournament second seed Zhang Ning also sealed a place in the last four, but not before Hong Kong fifth seed Wang Chen got to within two points of victory in the final set.

Chinese third seed Zhou Mi defeated unseeded Bulgarian Petya Nedelcheva for the final semifinal spot against Wang.

The women's performance helped make up for the disappointment of Lin Dan, the world number one and top seed, losing to unseeded Singaporean Ronald Susilo in the first round of the men's singles on Sunday.

Lin, regarded as the game's most exciting talent for years, lost 12-15, 10-15, to the Indonesian-born Singaporean.

China's table tennis champions were also preparing Monday to launch their bid for a third consecutive clean sweep of Olympic gold, after enjoying byes in the early rounds courtesy of their top seedings.

Maldives

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chaos after a state of emergency was imposed Saturday.

The unrest in the capital caused no disruption to tourism, the archipelago's main foreign exchange earner, residents said.

Holidaymakers who visit the Maldives are usually ferried from the airport island to resorts by boat or seaplane without having to go through the capital island of Male.

In the highly congested capital, home to 80,000 people, Gayoom's sea-front palace continued to be tightly guarded with two heavy military vehicles parked across the main road to prevent cars entering the area.

Gayoom has ruled the Maldives since 1978, turning the once fishing nation of 1,192 coral islands into a prosperous upscale tourist spot.

But he has faced mounting criticism at home and abroad for failing to tolerate any opposition. He began cautious reforms after an unprecedented riot in Male last September triggered by the death of an inmate at a nearby prison.

Dozens were hospitalised Friday when police fired teargas and used sticks and batons to break up a protest calling for the release of political prisoners.

Amnesty International appealed to the Maldives to abide by human rights in looking after detainees.

World oil prices

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Analysts are not ruling out the possibility that the New York oil futures contract may hit the 50-dollar-a-barrel level if unrest in Iraq continues and Russian oil titan Yukos fails to resolve its financial woes.

Political uncertainty in Venezuela, the fifth-largest crude exporter, as well as strong demand from China, the second largest oil consumer after the United States, are additional factors, they said.

China's imports of crude oil in the first seven months rose by nearly 40 percent from a year ago as its energy-hungry economy expanded at close to double-digit levels.

Administrator

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headquarters bombing in Baghdad on August 19.

He is currently serving his second four-year term as the UNDP administrator and earlier held senior positions in the World Bank. He is also the chair of the UN Development Group, a committee comprising the heads of all UN funds, programmes and departments working on development issues.

The administrator is also expected to hold a press briefing Thursday following his meeting with the PM. He is scheduled to leave Friday.

PALESTINIAN HUNGER STRIKE

Israel declares psychological war

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel has declared psychological war on hunger-striking Palestinian prisoners, saying it would barbecue meat outside their cells to try to break their will.

The 1,500 inmates, seen by Palestinians as symbols of resistance to Israeli occupation, want wardens to stop strip searches, allow more frequent family visits, improve sanitary conditions and install public telephones, supporters said.

But Israeli officials call the protest launched on Sunday a ploy by the prisoners to secure easier communication with militant groups waging an almost four-year-old revolt, and have vowed to fight their liquids-only fast.

The Prisons Service said it would draw on psychological tactics used against hunger strikes by Northern Irish militants in jail in the 1970s and 1980s which included depriving them of basic amenities.

"Among the various methods we plan to employ is holding barbecues outside the walls of the affected prisons," a Prisons Service spokesman said on Monday, without giving a timetable.

More than 7,500 Palestinians are imprisoned in Israel, their ranks swollen by recent sweeps for militants in the West Bank and Gaza.

In Gaza, about 3,000 Palestinians held a rally in support of the hunger strikers. Khaled al-Batsh, a senior leader of the militant Islamic Jihad group, said gunmen should kidnap "Zionist soldiers and settlers to be swapped for our prisoners".

In new violence, Israeli helicopters hit a rocket crew in the Gaza town of Beit Hanoun overnight, military sources said. But locals said two Palestinians killed in the missile strike had no militant links.

The hunger strike was praised by

Humayun Azad

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conference at their Fuller Road house. "I think Prof Azad should be buried on Nazrul Islam's grave premises since he was an intellectual," she added.

Asked about donation of Azad's body to Bangladesh Medical College Hospital, Kohinoor said no concrete words were given to the hospital authorities either by the family or Azad himself. "The last wish of the family is to bury Azad beside the national poet," she added.

"We are also asking for immediate implementation of our demands," Kohinoor said.

The family also wrote to the foreign ministry urging it to initiate the process of bringing back Azad's body from Germany. "We have also mentioned in the letter about handing over all the post-mortem reports to me," the wife said.

They also sought security from the home ministry for bringing the body from the airport to the house.

Manjur Kabir, Azad's younger brother, said the death of his brother would remain a mystery to the family. "We would not believe Prof Azad died a natural death," the brother said in an emotion-choked voice.

Students of Bangla Department of the university yesterday, meanwhile, took out a silent procession on the campus to mourn the death of Azad. They submitted a memorandum to the vice chancellor demanding immediate implementation of their 11-point

demand.

Their demands include initiating an international probe into the death, providing full security to the family, letting Azad's children stay at the university residence till the end of their study and providing financial assistance from the university if need be, burying Azad according to the family's wish, setting up Humayun Azad chair and offering scholarship at the university to evaluate the work of late linguist.

The students also demanded naming the Dhaka University Central Library or the Arts Building after Azad, taking proper initiatives to root out extremists on the campus, ensuring security of the teachers having received death threats and families of teachers, students, officials and employees.

Azad went to Munich last week on a PEN fellowship to conduct research on German romantic poet Heinrich Heine. He died of heart attack at his apartment in Munich last Thursday between 4:00am and 6:00am (German Time), according to German doctors.

Prof Faiz told The Daily Star they have called an emergency meeting of the syndicate for today to discuss the demands of Azad's family. Asked if the body would be buried in Nazrul's grave premises, the VC said the syndicate, the highest decision-making body of the university, would make the final decision. He also said the demands of the students of the Bangla department would be considered.

Clashes continue

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"We must work together to convince Moqtada Sadr and the dear brothers in the Mehdi Army to transform (their militia) into a political party whatever its leaning," he told the conference.

"We can come to an agreement on this through negotiations. We are ready to defend ourselves as we are ready for peace," said Sadr spokesman, Sheikh Ahmed Shaibani, in response to the initiative.

And in the southern city of Nasiriyah deputy governor Adnan al-Sharifi said a US journalist, Micah Garen, was kidnapped Saturday while reporting on archaeological sites in the area.

Garen is the founder and head of Four Corners Media, a company specialising in film, photo and written documentaries with offices in New York and Colorado, according to its website.

The head of archaeological services in Nasiriyah, Abdul Amir al-Hamdan, said Garen had been living for the past few days in a hotel in the city, 375 kilometres (235 miles), south of Baghdad.

Hamdani said he had fallen foul of Italian troops in the area after accusing them of killing civilians, including a pregnant woman, in a clash 10 days before with Shia militia.

Meanwhile, three US soldiers were killed in the Iraqi province of Najaf on

Sunday during clashes with Shia militiamen, the US military said Monday.

"Three US soldiers attached to the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit were killed as a result of enemy action in the Najaf province on August 15," a US military statement said.

In line with Marine practice, it gave no further details of the incident, which brought the number of US soldiers killed in hostile action to 698 since the war in Iraq began in March last year.

Earlier five people were killed when US forces carried out multiple bombing raids in the flashpoint Iraqi city of Fallujah, west of Baghdad, on Sunday, a doctor said.

"Five people were killed and six wounded," said a doctor at the Fallujah general hospital.

"The Americans fired seven missiles," he added, five of which fell in Hay al-Askari, in western Fallujah, one in al-Shuhada in the south and one in al-Sinaa in the eastern part of the city.

"It started at 11:30 am (0830 GMT). The operation was defensive in nature and not offensive as our marines were being targeted and shot by small arms and RPGs," said Lieutenant Colonel T.V. Johnson.

"We gave air support and carried out six different sorties during the day. Right now, it has stopped. We do it as and when needed," he added.