

# BNP defers Saturday's

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at her office yesterday afternoon to discuss the country's prevailing situation.

Relaying the PM's decision at a hurriedly called press briefing BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan said, "We called the rally to protest bomb attacks and anarchy, but are changing the schedule to avoid a possible clash or confrontation with the opposition. When we had announced the programme on Tuesday there was no opposition programme for Saturday. But, despite knowing our programme schedule, the opposition has called the hartal on Saturday."

The venue and time of the BNP rally in the capital at Muktangan on Monday afternoon will remain unchanged, he added.

Bhuiyan, also the minister for LGRD and Co-operatives, said the FBCCI delegation requested the PM to withdraw the programme with a view to bring the opposition to a dialogue to end political confrontation and unite against bomb attacks.

While making the request, the FBCCI delegation led by its President Abdul Awal Mintoo told the prime minister the country's business community wants to carry out business and recover from the worst-ever floods experienced, and wishes not to see any 'confrontation'.

As the worried business leaders said there should not be recurrence of such bombing incident, the prime minister observed that such bombings are not the deeds of those who want progress in economic, social and other sectors of the country. She sought assistance of all, including the political parties as well as individuals, in putting an end to such destructive acts.

Khaleda also urged all to assist the law enforcing and intelligence agencies in unveiling the mystery and assured of intensifying security system.

Referring to hartals, the PM said the political parties should also exercise their prudence in chalking out political programmes.

The business leaders appreciated her sincere initiatives following the August 21 attack on AL meeting, including her wish to meet the opposition leader, going to see the injured Ivy Rahman at the Combined Medical Hospital, the formation of investigation commission and sending letter to AL President Sheikh Hasina.

The FBCCI directors observed that those who are demanding resignation of the government actually want to hinder the investigation process.

"This might shaken the confidence of the people in the political parties," leaders of the country's apex trade body pointed out.

They termed the steps of the prime minister as examples of underpinning democratic process and hoped that these would bring new dimension in

politics of the country.  
**PRESS BRIEFING**  
Addressing the newsmen at the press briefing, Mannan Bhuiyan said, "We now need greater unity to resist bomb attacks, violence and anarchy. The hartals, campus strikes etc will only add to people's suffering. So, we request the opposition to sit with us to build a greater national unity against all evil designs."

The LGRD minister claimed the government is serious to curb bomb attacks, violence and anarchy, and is determined to net the criminals involved in the August-21 attack on Awami League rally.

He said the government has not only condemned the barbaric attack but also formed a judicial inquiry committee comprising a senior serving judge of the High Court, and ordered all law enforcing and intelligence agencies to investigate the incident and arrest the criminals.

Bhuiyan said bomb attacks took place during both the regimes of AL and the four-party alliance. "Our government is trying its best to stop such heinous incidents. But to do that we need united efforts by the government, opposition and conscious citizens," he noted.

He regretted that, though the prime minister sincerely wanted to meet the opposition leader to console her as well as work together to end such attacks, unfortunately the opposition did not allow it. "They did not even allow to hand over the condolence message written by the prime minister and adopted by a cabinet meeting," Bhuiyan said.

"We initiated an move for unity, but the opposition clearly seems to obstruct the move. But, we are still optimistic that the opposition will come around and sit in a discussion for the sake of greater national interest to resolve all problems, specially to bring an end to such bomb attacks," the BNP secretary general added.

On the failure of law enforcing and intelligence agencies to detect the perpetrators of the attacks, he said a high-powered committee is working to reorganise and reform those agencies.

On accepting technical assistance from foreign countries to investigate into the bomb attacks, he said the government would accept it if necessary. In this context he cited that the government had allowed the Scotland Yard to investigate the bomb attack on the British high commissioner.

BNP Joint Secretary General Tareque Rahman, Dhaka City Corporation Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka, Housing and Public Works Minister Mirza Abbas, Whip Ashraf Hossain and BNP central leaders Gayeshwar Chandra Roy, Zahiruddin Swapan MP, Mofiqul Hasan Tripty and Syed Emran Saleh Prince were present in the briefing.

# Sea of mourners

**FROM PAGE 1**  
A mourner carried a big black flag well ahead of the two-line AL procession, one of the biggest in recent history.

AL General Secretary Jalil called upon fellow activists to transform the grief into a force to topple the Khaleda Zia administration.

Some mourners held a huge black and white portrait of Ivy, who died from her wounds at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) after struggling three days for life in the wake of the attack.

Jalil came to the AL headquarters on foot from the Zero Point and addressed the processionists briefly, condemning the attack what he termed 'a black chapter in country's history'.

He accused the government of its role in the grenade attack. "Nobody can carry out such an attack without the collaboration of the government and without its knowledge," he alleged.

He paid tributes to Ivy, depicting her a symbol of protest against repression.

"We have lost many, but don't want to lose anymore. Let's come forward to transform the grief into a force to topple the government," Jalil said in an emotion-charged voice.

He called upon his party workers to make Saturday's agitation programme a success to add a spark to the oust-government movement.

"Insanally, we will form a government under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina to get rid of the misrule of the alliance government," he added.

The procession ended at the Shaheed Minar after crossing Bijoy Nagar, Kakrail and the Doyel crossing.

**11-PARTY ALLIANCE**  
The mourning procession of the 11-party alliance started from Muktangan and one of the banners it carried read 'Resist the misrule of the alliance government'.

The Procession, led by Monzurul Ahsan Khan, president of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Rashed Khan Menon, president and Bimol Biswas, general secretary of the Workers Party of Bangladesh and Rubin Hossain Prince of CPB, ended at Paltan after parading through Zero Point.

## 19 diplomats

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told reporters that "We came here to express sympathy for the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament and thank God that she is alive."

"This attack was against the independence, sovereignty and democracy of Bangladesh. This attack was not only against Sheikh Hasina but also against Bangladesh. I have been here for the last 17 years but it was very dangerous. It's also dangerous for us," Zarab said.

Ismail Abd-El Rahman Ghoneim of Egypt, Abdel Hamid Lakhoum of Morocco, L Alamin Mugharbi of Libya, Ali Talimi of Qatar, Lorraine Margaret Barker of Australia, Dato Paduka Haji Abdul Mokti Bin Haji M Daud of Brunei, Dasho Jigme Tshultim of Bhutan, Bagirat Basnet of Nepal, U Thane Myint of Myanmar, Manik Binwani of Singapore, Ngo Van Hoa of Vietnam, Jose Lino B Guerrero of the Philippines, Loh Seek Tiong of Malaysia, Phithak Phrombubpha of Thailand, Akmal Ghani of Afghanistan, Kyu-Hyung Lee of South Korea, Robert Beadle of Canada and Abdullah Al-Obaid Al-Namla of Saudi Arabia were in the delegation.

Talking to reporters, Hasina's Political Secretary Saber Hossain Chowdhury said the diplomats came here to express sympathy for the opposition leader.

"They never want to see such incident in any country of the world and stressed the need for a neutral investigation to reveal the fact," said Chowdhury.

## Air-powered

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an hour) in the workshop and had proved more efficient than battery-powered golf carts.

Di Pietro said the engine's potential was immense and he claimed to have attracted interest from the United States, China, the Netherlands and Britain.

## Ahmadiyya

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and we are ready to sacrifice our lives for this," Shamsul Haque, Dhakabashi president, said at a rally at the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque yesterday. "We will force the government to comply with our demand for declaring Ahmadiyyas non-Muslim."

On the other front, the South Asian People's Union against Fundamentalism and Communism (SAPUFC) called for a civil society resistance to fanatics and the main opposition Awami League threw its weight behind it. The left 11-party will join the resistance programme.

"We will take necessary steps," State Minister for Home Lutfozzaman Babar told The Daily Star last night. The police said they would not allow any group to attack the Ahmadiyya Complex.

Leaders of the European Union Heads of Mission met Foreign Minister Morshed Khan and expressed concern at the probable clashes.

"The EU Heads of Mission are concerned about the expected siege of the central mosque of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in Dhaka as announced by some religio-political groups. The EU Heads of Mission express the need for protection of minorities," a press release says.

Dhakabashi announced the capture programme in March and held regular meetings with leaders of other Islamist outfits in different parts of the city.

The fanatics attacked the Ahmadiyya base from a shroud procession on August 20, but the police chased them away before they could capture it.

Dhakabashi leaders asked all 'real Muslims' to gather at Azad field in Lalbagh before Juma prayers and will head for Bakshibazar in procession.

"We must invade the Ahmadiyya Complex ignoring resistance by the Ahmadiyyas or government," Shamsul Huq said.

The SAPUFC and eight legal aid and rights organisations sent letters to the home ministry and police to take immediate steps to stop fundamentalist aggression on the Ahmadiyyas.

Talking to The Daily Star on their preparation, Mustafizur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Lalbagh Police Station, said, "We have made sufficient arrangement to stop any attack on the Ahmadiyyas. Police will be there since morning."

Deputy Commissioner (South Zone) Khan Sayeed Hasan said: "We are holding talks with Aamra Dhakabashi leaders to cancel the gathering at Azad field and the capture programme. If talks fail, we have to take action."

Twenty-two eminent citizens in a statement yesterday urged all to join the civil society resistance to the fanatics.

Professor Kabir Chowdhury, Poet Shamsur Rahman, Sarder Fazlul Karim, Qayyum Chowdhury, Hena Das, Barrister Shawkat Ali Khan, Prof Mustafa Nurul Islam, Kalim Sharafi, Justice KM Sobhan, Prof Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir and Major General CR Dutt are among the signatories to the statement.

Bangladesh Lekhak Shibir, Bangladesh Chhatra League and Jatiya Mukti Council expressed concern at the planned capture of Ahmadiyya Complex.

# Interpol to help

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Morshed also said those "who could not tolerate Bangladesh gaining credibility as a moderate Muslim nation could be out to destroy that image."

Babar told The Daily Star. "Since Bangladesh is a member of Interpol, we believe the investigation would be strengthened with the participation of international experts."

"We are seeking their help to accelerate the investigation, not because nothing is coming out of the investigation as the result cannot be expected overnight," Babar said.

"How many of them (Interpol personnel) or when would they arrive would be decided much later," he said. **WHAT IS INTERPOL.**

Interpol facilitates cross-border joint-operational activities of its 181 member countries providing a range of criminal database, analytical services and an inter-police communication system.

It provides assistance to countries in identification of suspected terrorists operating in their countries and builds counter-terrorism capacity through training, analysis and database support.

Interpol has various projects that aim to keep track of trained terrorists, bomb attack warnings and organised crime groups that provide logistical support for terrorists.

**ALDISSATISFIED**

"We don't want to see any international body here only to assist our police and investigation teams formed by the government," said AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil.

"We believe only an independent and impartial international probe body will be able to trace the attackers, if it works on its own," he said.

Asked about the country's sovereignty and involvement of an international body in the investigation of the attacks, Jalil said: "Is there sovereignty of Bangladesh after the August 21 attacks? The attacks were against the country's sovereignty."

## Hasina rejects

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leaders will blast bombs to kill their ownmen?" she asked.

On recovery of a grenade from Dhaka Central Jail, Hasina said some criminals from the jail might have carried out the rally attacks with support from the government or some people tried to free some 'notorious criminals' exploding the devices.

Habibur Rahman Milon, Haroon Habib, Hasan Shahriar, Akhter Ahmed Khan, Swapan Kumar Saha, Abdul Jalil Bhuiyan and Omar Faruk went to the Sudha Bhaban, among others, to express sympathy for her.

# Ensure transparent

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responsible to justice."

Asked if UK had offered any help to Bangladesh to probe the series of grenade attacks, British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury, said, "We as friends of Bangladesh are always ready to offer assistance to it on any level or a specific issue, if requested."

Another diplomat who attended the meeting, said, "Your country is facing a turbulent time, and we are very worried. The government is also very serious about getting to the bottom of this attack and providing proper security for the opposition leader." He however sought anonymity.

After the meeting, Morshed told the media the government has informed the EU delegates it has more than doubled Hasina's security and taken necessary steps to hunt down the perpetrators of last Saturday's attack.

The EU delegation also conveyed the EU presidency's expectation from Bangladesh authorities to

provide minority groups with adequate protection. The delegation expressed its concern to Morshed over "The expected siege of the central mosque of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in Dhaka" today, one source said.

Morshed said the EU delegation appreciated the government's previous efforts to protect the minorities and asked it also to look into why some religious groups are vindictive to the Ahmadiyyas who have peacefully lived in the country for centuries.

Members of the delegation included Charge d'affaires (CDA) of European Commission Anne Marchal, Swedish CDA Anne Bruzelius, Danish CDA Tom B Hansen, French CDA Jean Romnicianu, German CDA Hermann Nicolai, Italian Deputy Head of Mission Sandro Pennacchio, Political Officer of British High Commission Allan Shaw and Adv. Governance of the Netherlands Embassy Brigitta Smits.

# Azad's body arrives

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at their Fuller Road house, Azad's wife Latifa Kohinoor said they would bring the body to the Central Shaheed Minar to allow all to pay tribute to him.

His namaz-e-janaza would be held also at the Shaheed Minar premises. "After the namaz-e-janaza, the body of Prof Azad would be taken to his family residence at West Rarikhil of Srinagar upazila in Munshiganj district," Kohinoor said.

"The village people asked me to return their son to their village and for this we will bury him there."

Duta President Prof AAMS Arefin Siddiqui however said the body would be taken to Azad's Fuller Road house and then to the Arts Building of the university. A namaz-e-janaza would be held at the Dhaka University Central Juma Mosque before it is taken to the Central Shaheed Minar. Sammilita Sangskritik Jote, an organisation of cultural activists, will pay its homage to Azad at the Minar.

Kohinoor said the university authorities have provided them with two buses to carry the body. Asked about security, she said she wrote several times to the home ministry, inspector general of police and police officials, DU authorities and Dhaka University Teachers Association asking them to ensure security of Azad's body till his burial.

The university authorities have also sought police security.

Azad went to Munich on August 9 on a PEN fellowship to conduct research on German romantic poet Heinrich Heine. He died of heart attack at his apartment on August 11. Azad was critically wounded in a deadly attack on February 27 while returning home from Bangla Academy.

Distraught family of Azad reacted in

disbelief at the news of his death and they believe he did not die a natural death. "He was killed in a planned way as part of a conspiracy. I don't believe it was a normal death." Azad's wife had said in her reaction to journalists after the news of his death broke.

Prof Azad, survived by his wife, a son and two daughters, has penned more than 60 books of poetry, novels, articles and literary criticism. He was a staunch feminist and a fearless critic of human-rights violation. He received the Bangla Academy Award in 1996.

## CID lacks

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police said no headway could be made in almost all the bomb attacks as the CID is so poorly equipped for the job. If investigations into those incidents could be successfully completed, the culprits involved in the recent grisly grenade attack on the Awami League (AL) rally could be tracked down, he thought.

Since 2000, the government sends officers of the army, police, paramilitary BDR and ansars to US for a one and half-month training on post-blast situation. But no-one of the trained police officers are posted in the CID.

A police officer who received the training, said they do not have the expertise needed to investigate bomb or grenade attack incidents. He suggested formation of a 20-member special unit comprising brilliant police officers and sending them abroad for the highest level of training on 'pre- and post-explosion and criminal detection'.

The unit will look into not only post-blast situation, it will also go into the roots or sources of the explosives, track down the culprits and find out their targets, he added.

"The undertrained and poorly equipped and trained CID explosion unit is actually not competent to handle deal with the perceived or actual threats of bomb attacks in the country," the official noted.

He however said if police had intelligence reports on the gangs carrying out bomb or grenade attacks, they could greatly prevent recurrence of such incidents.

Since March 1999, 16 major bomb or grenade attacks have been carried out in different places of the country, but police could only detect the gang members involved in the bomb attack at a Udichi function in Jessore. Investigators could not detect the culprits nor sources of the explosives even two to three years into the other incidents.

## Nazrul's

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the evening. It also organised two-day programmes focusing the life and works of the poet.

Nazrul, popularly known as 'Rebel Poet', became a source of inspiration to the common people as well as to the freedom fighters for his patriotic poems and songs during the movements against the then British rule.

His poem 'Bidrohi' played a significant role in arousing patriotism and yearning for independence.

Nazrul's poems and prose denounced all social and religious bigotry and plurality, cultural intolerance and oppression as these are the principal reasons for national discord and disharmony. The British rulers in undivided India banned many of his songs and poems.

He also got equal prominence and popularity in writing songs. His chief collections of poems are Agnivina, Sanchita, Dolan Champa, Chhayanaat.

## 2 more upazilas

**FROM PAGE 12**  
Secretary Sadat Hossain briefed newsmen.

The meeting upgraded Moulvibazar to 'A' grade district, considering its economic activities and geographical location and decided to set up a new police station at Patkelghata in Satkhira district.

It also decided to set up investigation centres at Raghunathpur of Domuria upazila in Khulna, Kazirhat of Mehidiganj in Barisal, Dakkhin Aicha of Charfashon in Bhola and Malifa of Sujanagar in Pabna.

The meeting decided to bring the entire Chittagong Port under Bandar Police Station. Four new investigation centres will be set up in the port area.

In the meeting, the prime minister said administrative reorganisation would be carried out keeping in mind the national interest and the necessity to lessen economic burden.

Nicar, set up after introduction of upazila system in 1982, has so far created 12 new upazilas.

Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman, LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, Health and Family Welfare Minister Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Law Minister Moudud Ahmed, Communications Minister Nazmul Huda, Food and Disaster Management Minister Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf, Post and Telecommunications Minister Aminul Huq, State Minister for Home Lutfozzaman Babar and secretaries concerned were present at the meeting.

## Saifur sees

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caused by the devastating floods.

He talked to the reporters after a meeting with US Ambassador Harry K Thomas yesterday at the Planning Commission.

He said Thomas emphasised a thorough investigation into all bomb blasts in the country including the latest one on the AL rally.

Thomas told the journalists that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina should work together to restore peace in the country.

Saturday's grenade attack that killed at least 19 people including central AL leader Ivy Rahman featured prominently in the discussion between Saifur and Thomas, meeting sources said.

"We discussed, among other things, the incidents of bomb explosions in Sylhet and grenade attack in Dhaka. The US envoy expressed concern at the recurrence of bomb incidents in Bangladesh. He underscored the need for thorough investigations into all bomb incidents," Saifur said.

He suspected the grenade attack was part of a ploy to destroy the country's economy and democracy.

## Furious Buriganga

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Hanif Mia, who lost nearly 80 percent of his house to the river, alleged the authorities were indifferent to the urgent need to stop erosion by dumping sand bags. He said he on his own initiative had dumped more than 1,000 sand bags in the river but could not save his homestead.

"I have done all I could to save my property, which my ancestors left for me. Today, I am left with nothing," Hanif wailed.

Those who lost houses yesterday include Mohammad Azam, Kokila Begum, Mohammad Islam, Geddu Mia, Mortaz Ali, Kalu Mia, Labu Mia, Mizanur Rahman, Shahjada, Siddiqui Rahman, Hanif Mia, Mohammad Abul, Mohammad Babul and Mohammad Rabi.

BIWTA officials said, with the change in course, the river suddenly became 72 feet deep near the spot, making the entire island extremely vulnerable to erosion.

"I am afraid the erosion cannot be stopped unless huge amount of sand bags are dumped here. It is so deep, it would take millions of bags to protect the place," said one of them.

A team of Savar district administration officials yesterday visited Basila and said the other side of the river, where the brick kilns were built, is under their jurisdiction.

"We now confirm that all the three brick kilns which have caused the river change its course is illegal and we are serving a notice of eviction today," said Mohammad Golam Mostafa, a land record keeper of Savar upazila under the land ministry.

# MPs plan to impeach

**FROM PAGE 12**  
arts, and the trust that is naturally reposed in his office, to communicate to the public a vast untruth," wrote Johnson in the Daily Telegraph newspaper.

Unlike US President George W. Bush, who pressed the case for "regime change" in Baghdad, Blair pitched the Iraq war to skeptical Britons as essential to stop Saddam from possessing chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

Blair also argued that, in the wake of the September 11 attacks in the United States in 2001, there was a real danger of the likes of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network acquiring such weapons from rogue states.

The proposed motion of impeachment would be put before the Commons after it comes back from summer recess on September 7.

It could upset Blair's own plan to play down Iraq and play up domestic issues in what many regard as the run-up to a British general election in the first half of next year.

Underpinning the impeachment motion is a 99-page report, prepared for Price by two academics, comparing statements made by Blair "with what the prime minister was actu-

ally being told" by intelligence services, Johnson said.

"We are guided by that most ancient of parliamentary doctrines: the principle of ministerial accountability, that those who lead us cannot mislead us and remain in office," wrote Price in the report's foreword.

"It is simply unprecedented for a minister to refuse to resign in the face of such compelling evidence."

Motions of impeachment can be put forward by no more than a single MP, obliging the speaker of the Commons to call a debate.

But the procedure has been dormant since a failed attempt in 1848 to impeach then prime minister Lord Palmerston over an alleged secret treaty with Russia, the Guardian newspaper reported.

Nine of the 11 MPs behind the impeachment motion are Welsh and Scottish nationalists; the others are Johnson, who supported the war on grounds of regime change, and fellow Tory Nigel Evans.

The Guardian said a number of backbench Labour MPs who opposed the Iraq war were considering whether to back the motion, even though doing so might put them at risk of being thrown out of the party.

# Move to coax trade bodies

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political situation. Although invited and coaxed by the FBCCI, most of the chiefs of the country's principal chambers and trade associations, except three, did not show up at the meeting held at the Prime Minister's Office at 3:30pm yesterday. They rather sought time to meet the PM separately.

The FBCCI had wrote to the chiefs of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association (BGMEA), International Chamber of Commerce-Bangladesh (ICC-B), Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI), Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), Bangladesh Textile Mills' Association (BTMA), Bangladesh Frozen Foods Exporters' Association (BFFEA), Bangladesh Pharmaceuticals Manufacturers' Association (BPMA), Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association (BKMEA), Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Ficci), Bangladesh Association of Banks (BAB), American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh (Amcham), Bangladesh Insurance Association, Bangladesh Chamber of Industries (BCI) and Bangladesh Terry Towel and Linen Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association inviting them to take part

in yesterday's meeting.

Except the chiefs of BTMA, BFFEA and BPMA and a representative of the DCCI, none of the invitees showed up in the meeting.

Sources said the FBCCI leadership felt embarrassed before the prime minister for its failure to persuade the business community to rally round the government in the current situation.

The FBCCI leaders at yesterday's meeting appreciated the government for its prompt action after the grenade attack to form a judicial probe body and invite Interpol to dig out the culprits.

A team led by ICC-B President Mahbubur Rahman met Opposition Leader Sheikh Hasina on August 22, the day after the grenade attack that left 19 people killed and hundreds of others maimed, to show sympathy to the AL chief.

The team included the chiefs of BAB, BGMEA, BKMEA, MCCI, BTMA, DCCI, Amcham and Ficci. An FBCCI team led by its First Vice President Kamaluddin Ahmed met Hasina separately the same day in the afternoon. After returning from India, Mintoo also paid a visit to Hasina the same day in the evening.

# 74 killed in Kufa

**FROM PAGE 12**  
But his arrival was marked by a deadly day in Najaf's twin city of Kufa, where 74 people were killed and 376 wounded in a mortar attack on the main mosque and shooting at a march which was blamed on Iraq's national guard, the health ministry said.

"The Najaf hospital received 39 bodies and 255 wounded and the one in Kufa 25 bodies and 60 wounded," a ministry official said.

The bodies of another eight people killed in the demonstration and 42 wounded people were transported to Diwaniya, about 50km east of Najaf.

Two other bodies and 19 wounded were taken to a hospital in Hilla, about 60km north of Najaf.

"We cannot distinguish between those who died in the bombing of the Kufa mosque and those who were killed in the demonstration," he said.

After a seven-hour journey, Sistani's motorcade stopped in Al-Saad one of the few relatively smart districts of Najaf, where the elderly Iranian-born cleric went to rest in a house.

Iraqi police and national guardsmen swarmed outside and blocked off the street as a stream of visitors flocked to the area.

"He's in good health, but he's tired from the trip and he cannot talk to anyone right now," said Najaf police chief Ghalab al-Jazari.

With military operations called off, an enormous crowd forced its way into Najaf's revered Imam Ali mausoleum, which has been trapped off from the outside world by heavy US bombardment and tank fire since Wednesday.

Rebel cleric Moqtada Sadr has used the shrine has the headquarters of his Mehdi Army since his spring uprising against foreign troops.

"We answered the call of Sistani who ordered us to follow to Najaf to break the siege. Police sort of tried to arrest us, but there was nothing they could do. It's the end of the siege," said one demonstrator Kazem Hamid.

"We have started contacts with Moqtada Sadr and in the coming hours we are waiting, hoping that we will succeed in saving the city from destruction," said Sistani spokesman Ahmed al-Khaffaf, calling on people not to enter Najaf.

"Demonstrators outside Najaf will