

Hopes grow for release of 2 French reporters

AFP, Baghdad

Hopes grew yesterday that two French journalists kidnapped two weeks ago in Iraq would be released by their Islamist captors.

"They are out of danger as was declared yesterday by Sheikh Hareth al-Dhari, their release could just be a matter of time," said Sheikh Abdel Salam al-Kubeisi, an influential cleric on the Committee of Muslim Scholars. Kubeisi's organisation has privileged contacts with the Sunni militant groups operating in Iraq.

One expert on the militants said the two Frenchmen were being held in the Sunni insurgent stronghold of Fallujah, west of Baghdad, and suggested that recent US strikes on the town risked complicating the negotiations.

Another source with close links to the insurgency told AFP on condition of anonymity that journalists Georges Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot were still in the hands of the Islamic Army in Iraq and being detained in the Baghdad region.

But French diplomatic sources in Baghdad said Friday afternoon they had no fresh information on the whereabouts of the two reporters and expressed irritation at the "completely groundless" speculation on their fates recent days.

The pair abducted August 20 on the perilous road between Baghdad and Najaf are "alive, in good health and being well treated" but still captive, one diplomat said, on condition of anonymity.

"There is hope and a great chance of a happy outcome. When will this happen? No one can tell. Maybe today, tomorrow or the day after that, but the situation in Iraq is such that it could not take much to scupper the whole process."

The Islamic Army in Iraq follows the strict Wahabist school of Islam and has already claimed responsibility for several abductions and executions in Iraq, including the killing of Italian reporter Enzo Baldoni last week.

The militant group thought to be based mainly in Fallujah has demanded Paris lift a controversial ban on headscarves in state schools to secure the release of the hostages.

But the law came into effect regardless on Thursday as the French school year began. The ultimatum from the captors was the first time kidnappers here had made demands external to Iraq.

However the targeting of a country which vigorously opposed last year's US-led invasion apparently backfired as France managed to muster broad international support for its efforts to free the journalists and united the vast majority of Muslim institutions behind its cause.

Messages of support continued to flow in Friday, with Shiite radical leader Moqtada Sadr calling for the reporters' release in recognition of France's anti-war stance through a sermon read by one of his aides.

Another member of Sadr's organisation accused America of masterminding the kidnappings during a vitriolic sermon in Baghdad.

Top US expert

FROM PAGE 1 TIP for all practical purposes is already in the MoI on protecting US interests in Bangladesh by installing the PISCES (Personal Identification Secure Comparison and Evaluation System), as the PISCES is a component of the TIP.

A strong advocate of zero-tolerance to terrorism, Black said in Manila last year that countries in the region should follow the US lead in 'making no concessions to terrorists', should help isolate and apply pressure on states that sponsor terrorism and force them to change their behaviour.

Sources said, besides checking up the government's counter-terrorism activities, Black would follow up requests a US team had made after the September 11 attacks in 2001 to enact stricter anti-money laundering laws to prevent terrorist groups from using Bangladesh as a money-transit point.

The Bush's special ambassador's visit also coincides with the presence of a FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) team to investigate the August 21 attack on an Awami League rally that killed 19 including frontline AL leader Ivy Rahman.

Black is scheduled to meet Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan and Opposition Leader Sheikh Hasina and hold a press briefing tomorrow.

Morshed, however, told The Daily Star Black's meeting with him tomorrow would be just a courtesy call. The minister said Black's trip has been planned for the last two months and is not related to last month's grenade attack.

Foreign policy experts also guess that a bilateral deal may be on the cards, as the US would certainly have interest in any attack like that on August 21 that possibly has a regional or global terrorism link.

Brig Gen (Rtd) Abdul Hafiz, former director general of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, said, "I think there is plenty of possibilities of signing of a counter-terrorism deal, as they [US] already has such agreements with India and Pakistan."

Brig Gen (Rtd) Shahidul Anam Khan also guesses a possibility of US offering assistance in intelligence and database sharing, as 'radical and Islamic fundamentalists getting a foothold in Bangladesh is a concern for the US'.

Black will fly in from Delhi after meeting Indian intelligence officials of the Indo-US joint working group on counter-terrorism.

With terrorism on the agenda, Black's talks with the government is sure to bring up concerns expressed in a US State Department report titled 'Terrorism in South Asia' updated on August 9. The report revived allegations of terrorist presence in the country that both Bangladesh and US governments had denied until two years ago.

The report mentioned Jamaah Islamiya (JI), a South-East Asian terrorist outfit, to be present in Bangladesh that could not be possible, it said, without some degree of tacit agreement from the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, which is thought by some to have close ties with the ISI of Pakistan.

The report also said al-Qaeda had been present for long in the Rohingya refugee camps, which also are recruiting spots for terrorist outfits in Afghanistan, Kashmir and Chechnya.

The report also states, without any reference, that ruling coalition partner Jamaat-e-Islami supports the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation.

Islam," he maintained, adding the national security is now at stake.

Asked if his party welcomes the FBI probe into the Bangabandhu Avenue massacre, Nizami said, as partner in the government, Jamaat has agreed to foreign experts' cooperation in unmasking the criminals.

The influential minister admitted that no government so far has succeeded detecting the perpetrators of the bomb and grenade blasts, adding the attackers in every case managed to escape while the country's main political parties traded accusations and counter-accusations.

Replying to a question, he claimed the overall law and order seems to be improving, except some terrorist acts by outlawed Janajuddha and Sarbahara operatives aimed at discrediting the government.

Jamaat nayeab-e-ameers Abul Kalam Mohammad Yousuf and Makbul Hossain, Secretary General and Social Welfare Minister Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid, assistant secretaries general Mohammad Kamaruzzaman and Abdul Kader Mollah, and Publicity Secretary Prof Tanjib Alam were also present at the conference.

Alliance will benefit if I am killed, says Hasina, UNB, Dhaka

Opposition leader Sheikh Hasina, who survived the August 21 grenade attack, has said the assassins wanted to kill her and destroy the nation's independence and sovereignty.

The remarks came when a delegation of Democratic Teachers Forum of Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) called on Hasina, also the president of Awami League (AL) at her Dhanmondi residence yesterday.

"Khaleda-Nizami alliance will be the beneficiary if I'm killed... previously (late president) Ziaur Rahman was the beneficiary of the killing of Bangabandhu," she said.

Referring to the bomb blasts during her rule, the former prime minister said the Awami League government had investigated all the bomb blast incidents and filed charge-sheets against the accused.

But the BNP-Jamaat alliance released those accused from jails after assuming power, she alleged.

The AL chief urged the teacher community to cooperate with her party in "advancing its one-point out-government movement."

The delegation, led by Prof Tahsinul Islam, called for forging national unity to uphold the spirit of the War of Independence.

Probe report

FROM PAGE 12 It further suspected that the crude oil might have been collected illegally as it was found in ballast tanks instead of cargo tanks only where crude oil is usually to be stored, sources said.

The head of the two-member body, Captain Faridul Alam, also assistant harbour master of CPA, unofficially informed Shipping Secretary Ismail Jabiullah of the findings. CPA Chairman AMM Shahadat Hossain, BSC MD Captain Azizul Haq and other high officials were also present.

The probe body, expected to submit the 14-page probe report yesterday, made six recommendations to stop oil spillage in future.

The recommendations include adopting precautionary measures while carrying oil in tankers and replacing the hydraulic valves, sources said.

Oil spillage from Banglar Sourav spread over some 15km in the bay and the port channel of the Karnaphuli river causing severe pollution and a large-scale fish mortality.

Scores of dead fish kept floating in the sea following the spillage that prompted formation of another two probe bodies by the Marine Fisheries Department and the Bangladesh Forest Research Institute in Cox's Bazar.

Mugger killed

FROM PAGE 1 In Mohammadpur, gunmen shot Abdullah Al Mamun, peon of 43 No. Ward Commissioner Abul Hossain Hashu.

Mamun, resident of 53/3 North Adabar, was returning home with his cousin Hanif from Adabar bazar at about 11:45am when three gunmen intercepted them. They sprayed him with bullets and fled the scene.

Critically injured Mamun was rushed to the DMCH with four bullets in the head, one in the back and another one in the left hand. Doctors stated his condition to be critical.

His father Abdul Mannan told reporters at the DMCH that gangsters loyal to Nabi attacked his son as Mamun helped police in nabbing one of Nabi's henchmen Rafiq six months ago. Rafiq stands accused in the killing of the local commissioner's armed guard Robi at Jahuri Mahal in Mohammadpur.

"Members of the Nabi group earlier threatened my son not to work for the commissioner with whom they have a fierce rivalry," he said adding that the same gang took several attempts on Mamun's life in the last six months.

Pvt universities

FROM PAGE 12 and its 1998 amended version lacked adequate provisions for governing the growing number of private universities.

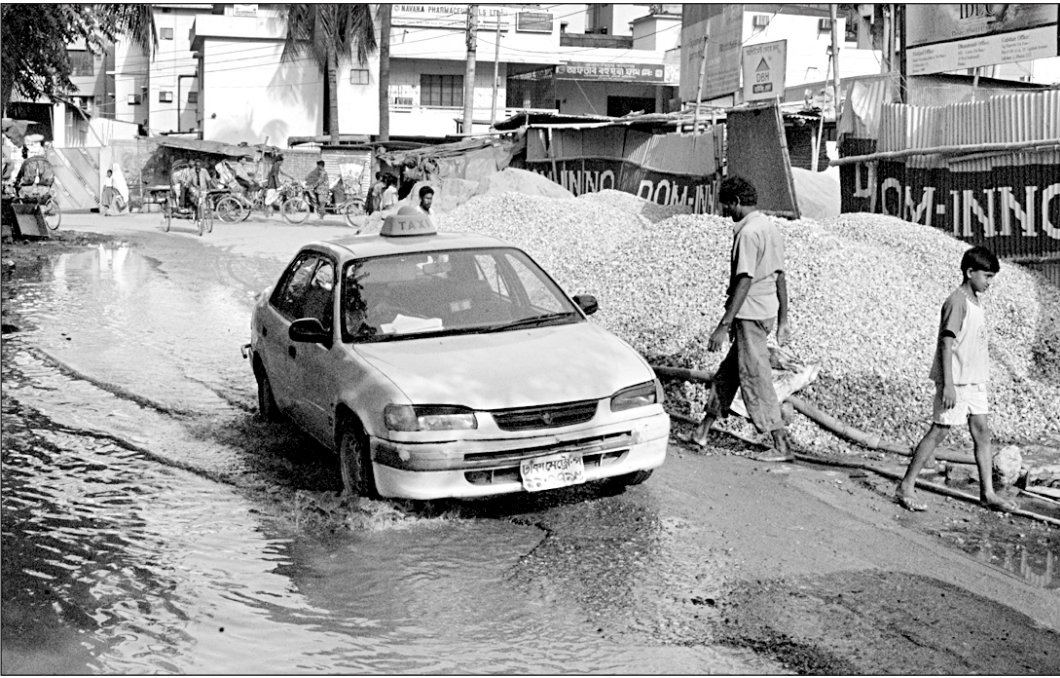
The proposed act will specify the role of vice-chancellors and board of trustees of the universities to eliminate the existing tug of war between the two sides, he said.

Rules require that every private university must have five acres of land and it should be shifted to its permanent campus within five years. But most of those are housed in multi-storied buildings, mainly in commercial areas, without the required campus.

Worse still, some do not even have any infrastructures for their students and run on infrastructures hired on shift basis from non-government educational institutions.

A number of private universities are housed in buildings where garments factories are located beside them.

Meanwhile, one private university started construction work on its permanent site last month and some have procured land on the capital's suburbs with no sign of any constructions as yet.



Drain water fed by rains spills onto a Segunbagicha road that is already covered in building materials making it difficult for pedestrians to use.

Nab attackers or face

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Oikyamancha Member Secretary Commander (Rtd) Abdur Rouf, Members Saifuddin Ahmed Manik, Pankaj Bhattacharya, Barrister Rabeya Bhuiyan, Engineer Abul Kashem, Advocate Zahirul Haq and Khandaker Shamsul Alam Dudu.

Talking to The Daily Star after the meeting, Dr Kamal said an effective national unity is a must to overcome the insecurity that has pervaded the entire nation in the aftermath of the August 21 grenade blasts.

Referring to the presence of Interpol and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) personnel, the Oikyamancha president said they had urged this earlier and do still hold that international experts should be brought in if need be.

He, however, said the government should have considered opinions of all prior to seeking international help. He stressed the importance of transparency in different

state organs with regard to the investigation.

Yesterday's meeting was held at Dr Kamal's residence. Oikyamancha leaders will meet again today, this time at Oikyamancha office in the city.

Riverbank

FROM PAGE 12 It was given to them long ago, not in my tenure," said UKil Abdus Sattar, state minister for land.

The Narayanganj district administration took many initiatives to save the river, but the efforts fell flat because of the industrialists' cosy links with top government officials.

"The river has been narrowing down and drying up because of the industries. They have been running the business for years taking permission from the government," said Harun Ur Rahsid, deputy commissioner of Narayanganj.

Aziz Supermarket

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where Ripon was shifted to the Orthopaedic Hospital in the evening as his condition deteriorated.

"We conducted a thorough search and found bomb-building materials including gunpowder, pieces of stone, empty bottles and three rolls of tape," Officer-in-Charge of Ramna Police Station Mahbubur Rahman told The Daily Star.

The staff of nearby shops said the NGO, owned by one Waliur Rahman of Azimpur, was taking money from people in the name of giving them job in the NGO for the last two and a half years. "It is a fake recruiting agency," the Ramna OC said.

Police did not find Waliur at his home.

Mahbubur alleged Ripon was a member of the Gopal-Babul gang in Farmgate and lived in Kathalbagan before going underground.

Denying his role in bomb-building, Ripon said he was standing outside the Sangstha office

when the bomb went off.

But Shohag, who also denied the charge, said they were sitting at the office when three young men passed by and the bomb exploded.

He said the NGO ran several projects on mass education, poultry and tailoring.

Hospital sources said Ripon's injuries suggest the bomb might have exploded in his hand or at a close distance.

"They are professional bomb-builders," the Ramna OC alleged. "I think they worked as bomb suppliers and hired the office to carry on the crime under the cover of an NGO."

On the same day, A seven-year-old girl suffered bomb injuries in Demra, police said.

Yasmin was playing with some others near their house at Demra Bahserpool at 5:00pm when a boy handed over a container to a girl.

As the children began playing with container, it went off and Yasmin suffered splinter injuries.

Interpol preparing

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the advance team on Wednesday.

Pullums who left Bangladesh yesterday afternoon took video footages and photographs to analyse the gory episode that local investigators said cover massive aspects. "If need be, more Interpol experts may come to Dhaka," an investigator said.

"It is not true that the investigation came to a standstill, rather it has made progress. The Interpol team does not want to disclose its findings immediately," he said, asking not to be named.

The Interpol team stayed all day in their hotel room talking to local investigators and analysing evidence they have gathered.

FBI INVESTIGATION

Gibson Wilson, an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), yesterday continued to probe the grenade attack with the assistance of local investigators in

Dhaka.

Inspector General of Police Shahudul Haque told The Daily Star that a local investigation team is working with the FBI agent, without giving further details.

JUDICIAL PROBE

Although the AL declined to talk to the one-member judicial probe commission terming it biased on Thursday, Justice Joydul Abedin, describing the commission as neutral, still expects cooperation from all to make the probe a success.

Justice Abedin sought an appointment with AL President Sheikh Hasina on Thursday that the AL leaders refused saying the AL does not trust the commission.

"I still hope witnesses will help me probe the incident," he said in an interview with BBC Radio yesterday. "I am collecting the accounts of witnesses to find the reasons of the attack."

Unplanned sand

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eral resources ministry does not impose any restriction on how much sand could be extracted and how it should be extracted. The authorisation is 'easy to obtain' and it does not have any scientific basis.

The ministry also lacks monitoring cell to oversee the extraction.

"The only thing the authorisation mentions is the area where sand can be extracted and thousands of people have obtained it," said one expert questioning authority.

The authorities have now asked the BIWTA to issue authorisation for extraction of sand from the riverbed on the 17-kilometre stretch of the Buriganga from Kholamora to Fatullah.

But along the river from Basila to Kholamora, dozens of volgates were found extracting sand during

the last one week. Asked about authorisation, workers of a volgate named Allar Dan said they did not have any.

The operator of the volgate said no-one has any authorisation to extract sand from the riverbed.

According to Mashud, a sand trader at Amin Bazar, they buy at least 10 barges of sand a day. Sand trade is a big business in the booming construction sector and sand is also being used to fill up miles of low-lying land around the capital, he added.

"What you see here is nothing compared to how much is being dumped on the low-lying land," Mashud said pointing his finger at the huge piles of sand on the bank of the Turag river.

Foreign aid dips

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Besides, poor aid utilisation capacity of the government agencies also accounted for the aid plunge.

Officials at the planning ministry, however, said the new public procurement guidelines also put brakes on project implementation, leaving millions of dollars of aid in the pipeline. \$6.2 billion aid was in the pipeline in the last fiscal year and the ERD forecasts more than \$8 billion in aids would be in the pipeline this fiscal year.

The FDI flow, meanwhile, is projected to rise to \$385 million in the FY 2003-04, an increase by 2.39 percent from \$376 million in the previous fiscal year, according to a new survey by the Bangladesh

Bank (BB).

The central bank adopted a new measurement of FDI flow from this fiscal year and the data collected include both flows on a gross basis and stocks. The BB will use the new methodology in calculating the balance of payments (BoP) from now on and the International Monetary Fund has recognised it, as it is consistent with international practice, according to the officials at the BB.

The latest quarterly of the BB published the FDI survey finds on the basis of the new methodology this month.

The net FDI flow stood at \$553 million in the FY01, \$380 million in the FY02 and \$376 in the FY03.

Bush accepts nomination

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agenda "policies of the past."

"Voters will make a choice based on the records we have built, the convictions we hold and the vision that guides us forward," Bush said, standing alone on an elevated theater-in-the-round platform in Madison Square Garden.

Kerry quickly joined the fray, flying from his home state, Massachusetts, to Springfield, Ohio, where he delivered a broad-side against Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney at a mid-night rally.

"They have attacked my patriotism and my fitness to serve as commander in chief," Kerry said. "I'm not going to have my commitment to defend this country questioned by those who refused to serve when they could have and by those who have misled the nation into Iraq."

Bush served stateside in the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam War era, while vice student and marriage deferments kept Cheney out of military service. Kerry, who has served in the Senate for the past two decades, has made his own Vietnam combat service in the Navy a centerpiece of his campaign.

"Misleading our nation into war in Iraq makes you unfit to lead this country," Kerry added. "Doing nothing while this nation loses millions of jobs makes you unfit to lead this country. Letting 45 million Americans go without health care makes you unfit to lead this country. Letting the Saudi Royal Family control our energy costs makes you unfit to lead this country," Kerry told several thousand supporters.

In New York, Bush unapologetically defended his decision to invade Afghanistan and Iraq.

"Because we acted to defend our country, the murderous regimes of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban are history, more than 50 million people have been liberated, and democracy is coming to the broader Middle East," the president said.

Polls show the nation deeply divided on the wisdom of going to war with Iraq, where violence continues despite a turnover of control in June to an Iraqi interim government and as the US death toll there is fast approaching 1,000.

First lady Laura Bush joined her husband on stage for the Madison Square Garden finale, followed by Cheney and his wife and extended families, as the convention came to a festive made-for-television conclusion in a blizzard of red, white and blue balloons, confetti, and

More than 100 killed

FROM PAGE 1

from the school.

Fleeing children rushed past armored personnel carriers that hid heavily armed soldiers firing at the building from which they escaped.

"They are alive! They are alive!

They are alive!" screamed rescuers to parents as they carried out wounded and shocked children.

Russian media said most of the children had survived, but about 400 local residents and former hostages were taken to hospitals in the area after being injured, Inferfax reported.

One hundred and fifty-eight children are among those hospitalised in the southern town of Beslan, a source close to the regional president told Moscow Echo radio.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had vowed the hostage's safety was his top priority and the security services said the sudden assault on the school had not been planned.

"I want to point out that we had not planned any kind of armed action. We offered the continuation of the ongoing talks to peacefully release the hostages," said the FSB regional head, Valery Andreyev.

He said the chain of events was triggered when two powerful explosions went off around the school building at around 1:00 pm (0900 GMT).

"The bandits opened intensive fire at the fleeing adults and children. To preserve the lives of the hostages, fire was opened in reply on the bandits. Locals with weapons also started to fire at the bandits. This did not allow effective conditions for the special forces," Andreyev said.

"They were shooting at us from the roof," said one child, recalling how the hostage-takers opened fire on kids who were trying to escape their captors amid the blasts that opened an escape route.

streamers. Bush said that in a second term, he would lead a bipartisan drive "to reform and simplify" the federal income tax, which he called "a complicated mess filled with special interest loopholes."

He also outlined a variety of proposals, most of them floated before, to provide tax and other incentives to help people buy homes, start small businesses and get job training; to encourage investment in economically distressed areas; and to give people more say in managing their own health care and retirement finances.

Bush also dusted off a proposal to allow younger workers to divert a few percentage points of their Social Security payroll taxes into 401(K)-like investment funds. Bush abandoned an earlier version of the proposal after a post-Sept. 11 fall in the stock market.

Bush also revived his "compassionate conservative" theme from 2000, saying he believed "that government should help people improve their lives, not try to run their lives."

He contrasted his policies with Kerry's vow to roll back many of the Bush tax cuts to help fund an expanded government health care programme and to help strapped workers.

The president at times used self-deprecating humor to present his case for another term.

"Some folks look at me and see a certain swagger, which in Texas is called 'walking.' Now and then I come across as a little too blunt and for that we can all thank the white-haired lady sitting right up there," he said, indicating his mother, former first lady Barbara Bush, sitting alongside his beaming father, the first President Bush.

Bush's nomination triggered full federal financing for the rest of race.

Upon accepting the Democratic nomination five weeks ago, Kerry received \$75 million in federal funds for the fall campaign. Bush now gets a like amount and must stop using privately raised funds.

The federal financing comes after the two candidates spent a record \$200 million in privately raised funds between them for pre-convention campaign advertising. And that does not include money spent by political parties or independent outside groups like the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, whose ads challenging Kerry's military service in Vietnam have become a major distraction for the Democrat.

"No, they were shooting from the second floor," corrected a child who looked no older than six.

Hostages said they had not been given any food or water during their ordeal. One naked boy said: "We drank urine."

The gunmen had reportedly mined the school's grounds, and at one point threatened to kill 50 children for every one of their number killed. Chechen separatists have been waging a decade-long war for independence from Russian rule.

Parents had maintained an agonising round-the-clock vigil outside the school since Wednesday, the first day of the new school year and traditionally a day of festivities and celebrations in Russia.

Russian special forces were Friday looking for 13 of the gunmen, ITAR-TASS reported, citing the regional interior ministry, as other reports said five of the hostage-takers were dead. Neighbouring Ingushetia shut its borders to prevent the fugitives slipping away.

European leaders were among the first to express regret at the bloody outcome of the Russian hostage crisis, calling it a "deep human tragedy," but accepted the "dilemma" facing the Russian authorities.

The United Nations had met in emergency session on Wednesday as the crisis erupted, calling for the immediate release of the children.

The hostage-taking was the fourth attack blamed on Chechen rebels to rock Russia since last week.

Those have included a bomb at a bus station on August 24, bomb attacks that brought down two airliners the next day and killed 90 people and an attack by a female suicide bomber outside a Moscow subway on Tuesday that left nine dead and 51 people wounded.