

Blair's qualified Iraq apology to woo party

REUTERS, Brighton, England

Tony Blair offered his Labour party yesterday a partial apology for waging war in Iraq -- a desperate attempt to pull supporters back behind him ahead of an election next year.

But as two more British soldiers died in Iraq and a hostage remained under threat of death, his hopes of drawing a line under two years that has wrecked his public trust ratings are far from secure.

"The evidence about Saddam having actual biological and chemical weapons ... has turned out to be wrong," Blair said, his nearest yet to a mea culpa.

"The problem is, I can apologize for the information that turned out to be wrong but I can't, sincerely at least, apologize for removing Saddam," he said. "The world is a better place with Saddam in prison not in power."

Blair's speech was interrupted twice by protesters, one yelling that the premier "had blood on his hands," others opposing a planned ban on fox-hunting.

They were ruthlessly bundled out of the hall.

For most of his speech, Blair focused on domestic issues which he hopes will define his campaign to win a third term at a general election expected in May.

But aides said he knew that would not resonate, with party or the wider public, if he did not tackle Iraq head-on.

Blair made the case for war on the assertion that Saddam had banned weapons ready to use. The fact none has been found more than a year after major military action finished has soured British public opinion.

"Whatever disagreements we have had, we should unite in our determination to stand by the Iraqi people until the job is done," he said, adding that foreign affairs and

domestic prosperity were indivisible.

"If I don't care and act on this terrorist threat, then the day will come when all our good work on the issues that decide people's lives will be undone because the stability on which our economy ... depends, will vanish."

Blair also mentioned British engineer Kenneth Bigley, who was abducted by Al Qaeda-linked militants 12 days ago, and the two soldiers killed in Basra yesterday.

"I want to express our condolences to the latest British casualties in Iraq," he said, "and I want to, on behalf of all of us, express our support and solidarity with Ken Bigley and all the Bigley family."

Bigley's brother has accused Blair of not doing enough to appeal for his release.

Outside, some 8,000 marchers staged a noisy protest on the seafloor of this southern coastal resort against the government's attempt to ban the ancient pursuit of fox hunting.

Many of them walked with hounds by their side and carried placards reading "Fight prejudice. Fight the ban."

Witnesses said some demonstrators dumped the carcasses of two calves and a horse near the conference center as part of their protest. Two men were arrested.

The meat of his speech heralded domestic policy plans -- Blair stressed the election could only be won with a radical agenda, not solely by resting on past achievements.

He also offered an olive branch to finance minister Gordon Brown, whose supporters believe should have had Blair's job by now.

Referring to incessant talk of a feud between the two, Blair said Brown was "a personal friend for 20 years and the best Chancellor this country has ever had."

JU initiates probe

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remarks made by Assistant Professor Dr Obaidur Rahman and suspended him from carrying out departmental activities including taking classes and examinations.

Meanwhile, Dr Obaidur Rahman has apologised to students of 2002-2003 academic session for the remarks he made while taking their class.

"I apologised for asking female students to wear burqa and changed the 20-mark homework on praising Allah," he said. He also denied the allegation of calling Hindu students by Muslim names.

Vice-chancellor Prof Khandaker Mustahidur Rahman said, "Necessary steps would be taken against him on receipt of the probe body report."

Different student bodies have protested the teacher's reported remarks and brought out processions on the campus yesterday demanding proper action.

Outlaws kill 2

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demanded a toll of Tk one lakh from Asim, a seasonal businessman and threatened to kill him as he declined to pay.

Meanwhile, in Kushtia, a PBCP man was killed and 15 others were injured in a gun battle with a joint forces team at village Mohendrapur in Kumarkhali upazila.

Acting on a tip-off, the joint forces team raided a house of the village where the PBCP men with their leader Billal Hossain were holding a meeting at about 4am.

The joint forces surrounded the house and asked the cadres to surrender. But the cadres opened fire on them, triggering a fierce shootout.

The forces and cadres traded at least 60 rounds of gunshots during the hour-long fight which left Billal, leader of the underground operatives, dead and at least 15 others including two police personnel injured.

Police later arrested three critically injured cadres, Hafiz, 25, Siddiqi Ali, 30, and Tuhin Hossain, 22, from the spot and seized two shutter guns with five bullets, while others managed to escape.

Police said Billal, 40, was accused in four cases including Awami League leader Subas Kumar Das murder case and several abduction cases filed with Kumarkhali police station.

Police are after others of the gang, sources said.

Mars orbiter

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The maneuver "is tricky and the spacecraft does not always hit its target. However, when it does, the results can be spectacular," said Ken Edgett, staff scientist for Main Space Science Systems of San Diego, which built and operates the Mars Orbiter Camera.

Mars Global Surveyor reached Mars in 1997 and, after adjusting its orbit, began systematically mapping the planet in 1999. It has returned more than 170,000 images.

Its wide-angle camera photographs the entire planet daily. A narrow-angle camera is used to study specific features and prospective future landing locations.

In normal operations the spacecraft can pick out objects on the surface that are about 13 feet to 16 feet across. The roll technique allows objects as small as 4.9 feet to be seen.

The twin rovers, Spirit and Opportunity, are 4.9 feet high, 7.5 feet wide and 5.2 feet long.

Mars Global Surveyor has had a longer productive life than any other spacecraft sent to the Red Planet, according to managers at Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

This week, the spacecraft begins its third mission extension an extra two years funded with \$15 million.

BDB, Gono Forum

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He also said people of the country want change in the state power through a constitutional way.

To another question on whether there was any difference between Awami League's initiative on forging alliance of progressive political parties and BDB-Gono Forum's initiative, Dr Kamal replied there was no basic difference between these two moves, rather it was a simultaneous movement.

The Gono Forum leader also said against the backdrop of August 21 grenade attack on AL rally, the necessity of forming alliance has become very important.

Regarding the investigation committee formed by the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA), Dr Kamal said the investigation committee was formed within the framework of constitution.

"Present Law Minister Moudud Ahmed and Khandakar Mahbubuddin Ahmed were member of the SCBA investigation committee after the murder of Moyezuddin in 1980's," said Dr Kamal.

He said there was no scope to create unnecessary debate on the investigation committee formed by the SCBA to probe the August 21 grenade attack.

Gono Forum General Secretary Saifuddin Ahmed Manik, Presidium member Pankaj Bhattacharya, BDB Secretary General Major (ret'd) Abdul Mannan and Member Secretary Abdur Rouf attended the press conference.

JS body smells rat

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He said State Minister for Planning Anwarul Kabir Talukdar did not oppose the committee's observations and admitted that there were some incidents of fund misuse in hasty implementation of development projects.

The JS committee also found 11 ministries had failed to spend 29 percent to as much as 79 percent of their ADP allocations in last fiscal, sources said.

The committee questioned the adequacy of development project implementation system and asked the ministry concerned to amend Public Procurement Regulation 2003, which requires the lengthy process of floating tender for procurement, to make the system easier.

The committee observed there is no efficient agency in the ministries and divisions concerned to implement ADP projects properly. The Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Division (Imed) of the planning ministry commissioned to supervise the ADP is unable to function as required due to a dearth of manpower, the meeting said.

Akbar Ali said, "The Imed at most can supervise only 10 percent of the total projects. That is why the development projects of the current fiscal has not yet begun properly."

In a report submitted to the meeting, the IMED said Tk 16,838 crore was spent out of a total ADP allocation of Tk 19,000 crore in the last fiscal to implement 1,109 projects.

Among the ministries and divisions that spent the highest portion of development project funds in the last quarter of FY04, civil aviation and tourism ministry tops the list with 77 percent spending, followed by industries ministry with 75 percent, defence 69 percent and post and telecommunications 69 percent. Law ministry spent 66 percent, water resources ministry 61 percent, youth and sports ministry 55 percent, housing and public works ministry 53 percent, women and

children affairs ministry 52 percent and forest and environment ministry 51 percent.

Among those who spent less than 50 percent in the last quarter are establishment ministry (49 percent), power division (48 percent), IMA division (46 percent), commerce ministry (44 percent), textiles ministry (44 percent), Economic Relations Division (45 percent), Prime Minister's Office (43 percent), Energy and Mineral Resources Division (44 percent), Fisheries and Livestock (43 percent) and Primary and Mass Education Division (41 percent).

In defence of the abnormally high project spending in the last three months, planning ministry officials at the meeting said funds had not been released in the first quarter of last fiscal. In the second quarter, preparatory processes were completed and project activities were carried out in the third quarter.

They said, after evaluation of project implementation, the bills were paid in the last quarter and that is why the highest spending in development project implementation appears in the last quarter.

But the parliamentary committee was not satisfied with the explanation and said the whole system should be amended for the sake of proper implementation of development projects.

Among the ministries and divisions that failed to spend part of their ADP allocations are Finance Division (79 percent), Parliament Secretariat (77 percent), Internal Resources Division (76 percent), Election Commission Secretariat (69 percent), liberation war affairs ministry (64 percent), Planning Division (53 percent), land ministry (44 percent), information ministry (39 percent), food ministry (32 percent), cultural affairs ministry (29 percent), shipping ministry (26 percent) and Chittagong Hill Tracts ministry (26 percent).

Rip-off at Ctg Port

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of imported cargo and 24,57,000 tonnes of exported cargo. The research finds that the average tips for loading and unloading of one tonne cargo are Tk 19, meaning the total tip Tk 40.8 crore a year for loading and unloading alone.

An importer pays Tk 354 in additional charge for clearance of one tonne cargo from the port and customs officials, while an exporter pays Tk 285 in additional charge a tonne.

According to the TIB finds, customs officials are bribed Tk 10,760 and port officials Tk 7,173 on average for clearance of an imported consignment in a stage that marks the highest bribe amount at Tk 1 lakh and lowest at Tk 2,700.

TIB blamed lack of coordination between port authorities and customs department for damage to goods worth crores of taka. Port rules require that a consignment or container should be auctioned off, if no-one clears it in 15 days. But the port and customs officials will have to be paid Tk 33,400 on average for auctioning off a 20-ft unit container, TIB says.

TIB also came up with some recommendations to check the irregularities at the port and called for an amendment to the Port Authority Act 1976 to make the port authority an autonomous body reducing influence of the shipping ministry.

It also suggested setting up a

coordination committee incorporating all stakeholders including port users, engaging private companies in worker supply and equipment handling, assigning responsibility to agents to appoint stevedores and installing close-circuit cameras to identify dishonest officers and check pilferage.

"The government should take urgent steps to cut red tape and streamline the clearance procedure. Competitiveness of Bangladeshi exports largely will depend on service quality at the port in the quota-free era," Professor Muzaffer said.

The government may introduce performance-based salary and other incentive packages for customs and port officials to cut corruption and improve service quality.

A senior customs official with the National Board of Revenue told The Daily Star that irregularities that TIB report found with customs officials were sweeping, not specific.

"There are monetary irregularities in many offices -- not only in the customs department. We are taking some reforms measures and introducing automation system to customs offices in phases. I look forward to positive results," the official said, asking not to be named.

Shipping Minister Akbar Hossain and Secretary of the ministry Ismail Zubaerullah could not be contacted for comments despite repeated attempts.

A party desperate

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Minister Khandakar Mosharrar Hossain and members of parliament Redwan Ahmed, Monzurul Ahsan Munshi and Shah Mofazzal Hossain Kaikobad also addressed the meetings.

Addressing the rallies, the prime minister said the party is out to hinder the development process when the country is marching ahead in the right way.

"This party does not do politics for the welfare of the people but for going to power," the prime minister said.

They want to create chaos, they want to put the democratic process into crisis, she observed in the wake of opposition agitation.

"This party has launched propaganda against the country terming it a 'failed state', sometimes branding it as 'al-Qaida' and sometimes as 'Taliban state'," the prime minister said.

She reminded that the party, during its rule, let loose terror, created godfathers, ruined rural economy and introduced copying at public examinations.

The prime minister listed the development programmes of the government and measures for curbing crimes. She mentioned that "operation clean heart" and the activities of the recently formed Rab (Rapid Action Battalion) restored people's confidence in the law enforcers.

When the measures of the government are being appreciated

globally, the certain party is conspiring how to keep the country economically weak and how to destroy it.

At Rajpur in Daudkandi upazila, the prime minister inaugurated rehabilitation programme for fish cultivators by releasing fish fry into water bodies in submerged area.

Distributing cheques for Tk 41 lakh among marginal fish cultivators, the prime minister said the programme of pisciculture in submerged land could bring about a revolution in the country.

Referring to the government assistance provided for such projects, she called upon literate youths to come forward to avail of the opportunity.

Judicial body

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international investigators in identifying the suspects, it was found that their cameras were not focused on the rally but moved aimlessly.

It appears that the private TVs are not capable of tackling any emergency situation, their camera operation was not technically sound and the crew were ill-trained, said the sources.

The commission is likely to submit its report on October 2. The chairman of the commission, however, declined to say anything about the coverage of the rally by the electronic media.

AL resolute

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huge gathering in the October 3 rally to make it a big anti-government showdown.

At the meeting AL General Secretary Abdul Jaill called upon the leaders of six district units to make the October 3 rally a success braving all kinds of repression by the government.

He said government already took the way of mass arrests of opposition workers in a bid to foil the Paltan rally. "Through the grand rally we have to prove that people of the country have rejected the BNP-Jamaat-led coalition for its failure to run the country", Jaill told the leaders.

AL Presidium Member Suranjit Sengupta, also present at the meeting, told The Daily Star, "It was part of preparation ahead of the October 3 rally. We told the district leaders to join the rally with the party workers as well as common people".

Referring to the ongoing mass arrests of party people, Suranjit said this type of repression of the government would not prevent the people from joining the rally.

Chaired by acting party chief Zillur Rahman, the meeting was attended, among others, by Amir Hossain Amu, Abdur Razzak, Tofael Ahmed, Suranjit Sengupta, Mukul Bose and Akhtaruzzaman.

Jail killing case

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but did not set a fresh date for pronouncement of the judgement.

In a last-minute bid to save Taheruddin, his counsel ABM Sharfuddin Khan Mukul on September 4 filed two petitions -- one for Saifuddin's deposition and the other for inspecting the Bangabhaban where Taheruddin has been alleged to have plotted the assassination of national leaders Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, M Mansur Ali and AHM Qamaruzzaman. Court however rejected the second petition.

Talking to The Daily Star last night, Mukul said, "I too have heard he (Saifuddin) is sick but I've not visited him. I understand he has already been served with a summons."

"The police will submit a report on his health tomorrow (today) should he fail to appear at court," Mukul said.

"Court may ask the prosecution and me (being the petitioner's counsel) to visit his house to know whether he is fit for his deposition," he added.

If court is convinced that Saifuddin is not fit to give statement, it would cancel its decision for recording his statement and fix a date for delivering the verdict, the lawyer said.

Magura, Satkhira

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people were admitted to Satkhira and Kalarao hospitals.

Our Magura correspondent says some 145 villages in Sadar and Shalikhia upazilas are under water as the river Fatki swelled with rolling waters from the upstream. The floodwaters however started receding from three unions in Sadar upazila.

A four-year-old baby died of pneumonia in Thoipara village and another two-year-old died of diarrhoea in Maniknagar village of Dhaneswargati union in Shalikhia, local Union Parishad Chairman Ishaq Hossain said.

The chairman sought immediate government initiative to send medical teams to the affected areas. He said an acute crisis of drinking water was prevailing in the flood-hit areas as most tube-wells went under water.

More than one lakh people in Shalikhia and Sadar upazilas are suffering from waterlogging with slow recession of floodwaters, officials said.

The flood victims who took shelter elsewhere are yet to return home and they complained of inadequate relief operations. "We are almost starving for the last five days," said Niranjan, 65, of Maniknagar village, at a flood centre.

Our correspondent from Satkhira says the overall flood situation in Kalarao, Tala and Sadar upazilas remained unchanged yesterday. The flood-affected people are in great miseries due to lack of pure drinking water and relief materials.

Hundreds of the affected people are living under open sky as they could not return to their homesteads, which went under water. The floodwaters did not recede in the last two days creating a permanent waterlogging in the areas.

Tax return

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made it mandatory for the taxpayers who have TIN (taxpayers' identification number) to submit returns on their income. They would also need to submit a statement on their lifestyle with the returns. Government employees with taxable income would also have to do the same.

A total of 15.38 lakh had TIN and 10.13 lakh of them submitted income tax returns and 5.76 lakh paid tax in the last fiscal year. The number of individual taxpayers stands at 5.30 lakh and corporate taxpayers at 11,000.

2 British soldiers

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British soldiers killed in combat in Iraq to 25.

The two Egyptians were among eight employees of Egyptian telecom firm Orascom kidnapped in Iraq last week, six of them in the Syrian border town of Al-Qaim and two of them in the capital.

"Two hostages... were freed Monday night from Al-Qaim and another two are expected to be today," said an Orascom spokesman.

The Egyptian government was only immediately able to confirm the release of one of the men.

Meanwhile, the insurgent enclave of Fallujah, where many of the foreign hostages are believed to have been held, was again pounded by US aircraft overnight.

"Three people were killed and six others wounded," said Dr Rafaa Hiaid at the town's main hospital.

US army spokesman Jay Antonelli denied the strike had caused any casualties, although the US-led coalition has no forces in the town since abandoning a month-long siege this spring.

He said the raid again targeted suspected hideouts of militants loyal to US archfoe Zarqawi, who is responsible for scores of deadly anti-coalition attacks and kidnappings.

Trans-boundary

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press the Bangladeshi side to dismantle them. India maintains that its insurgents operating in northeast India use those camps to run their campaign against the Indian forces.

BDR Chief Major General Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, however, denied the existence of terrorist camps in his country. He said "almost all the places" cited by India in the past had been searched but "not a single camp" was found.

"They (India) have cited in the previous list the locations, some of which are our cantonment areas, our (force) headquarters, some coastal areas and some in the sea," he told reporters here.

Chowdhury, in his inaugural address, said during the last 18 months, the two sides have been able to consolidate the existing friendship and no new issues or disputes have arisen during this period. He described the develop-

ments as an achievement. In the capital, explosions rocked the Sunni Haifa street area, while US helicopter gunships struck the Shia militia stronghold of Sadr City, one of Baghdad's mostly densely populated neighbourhoods.

The renewed fighting underscored the concerns raised by Jordan's King Abdullah about the possibility of holding elections in January as planned.

The king, who delayed his own parliamentary elections for two years, told the Paris daily Le Figaro Tuesday: "It appears to me impossible to organise indisputable elections in the chaos currently reigning in Iraq."

His remarks followed warnings from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and comments by US Secretary of State Colin Powell that the insurgency was growing more dangerous as the election target dates near.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld raised the possibility last week that the polls might go ahead in most of Iraq, leaving out the regions most touched by the violence.

But critics argue that polls in which some areas are disenfranchised would not be the sort of "indisputable elections" talked about by the Jordanian king.

HR groups to move court

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Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed has denied the mass arrests. His cabinet colleague State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar said the government launched the countrywide drive to catch criminals.

Awami League General Secretary Abdul Jaill however alleged the drive has been launched to thwart the opposition agitation, which has seen hundreds of his party activists thrown behind bars.

In the wake of the wholesale arrests that have created panic among people, human-rights activist Hamida Hossain yesterday filed the application to the High Court on behalf of a number of human-rights and legal aid organisations.

"We will move the High Court today with the application seeking injunction for an immediate stop to the mass arrests and release of the arrestees," Barrister Tanjib Ul Alam, lawyer for the applicants, told The Daily Star yesterday.

At the joint meeting attended by the senior activists of the Human Rights and Legal Aid Commission under the Bangladesh Bar Council, Ain O Salish Kendra, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, Sammilito Nari Samaj and Karmajibi Nari discussed whether they should file a fresh writ petition with the High Court challenging the legality of the mass arrests.

The human-rights organisations are likely to file a fresh writ petition with the High Court next week having taken into account the response of the legal notice and the application filed to the High Court, a human-rights activist said yesterday, wishing anonymity.

Earlier, the government did not respond to a court ruling that asked it to explain in three weeks why section 86 of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Ordinance, under which the police made 15,000 arrests before AL's April 30 deadline for the fall of the government, should not be declared a violation of the constitution.

The High Court also directed the government to submit a report with names and particulars of the arrestees and the steps taken for their release from jail.

The government did not comply with the court order and, instead, it launched the latest countrywide crackdown on opposition adherents.

In yesterday's application filed with the High Court, Hamida Hossain said it is evident that the government has been arresting innocent and poor citizens of Dhaka

City and elsewhere in total disregard of the fundamental rights of the citizens guaranteed under the constitution.

The recent mass arrest of innocent citizens under section 86 of the DMP Ordinance and Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code is manifestly illegal and without lawful authority, Application asserts.

Unless the government is prevented, through an injunction, from arresting innocent citizens, the fundamental rights of the citizens would continue to be violated without any legal redress, the application warns.

Pakistan nabs 11 al-Qaeda suspects

AP, Islamabad

Pakistani security forces have arrested at least 11 suspected Islamic militants in raids across the country since the killing of a key al-Qaeda operative over the weekend, an intelligence official said yesterday.

Interior Minister Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao said security forces were seeking to "break (the) network" connected to the slain militant, Amjad Hussain Farooqi, who he said had close contacts with al-Qaeda leaders and was involved in "almost all major terrorist attacks in the recent years" in Pakistan.

Sherpao said those arrested so far linked to Farooqi. He would not say how many suspects had been rounded up or whether they included any major figures. And there was no indication any of those arrested were part of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's inner circle.

An intelligence official in Karachi, speaking on condition of anonymity, said 11 suspected Pakistani militants have been captured based on information yielded from interrogations of three suspects arrested during the shootout in which Farooqi was killed on Sunday.

Officials said at least one of the arrests was in Karachi -- a hotbed of militancy in southern Pakistan.