

Car bomb kills four in Iraq

Insurgents kidnap 3 senior officials

REUTERS, AP, Baghdad

A suicide bomber detonated his car at a petrol station near an Iraqi police and army checkpoint south of Baghdad yesterday, killing four civilians and wounding 19, police said.

They said most of those killed had been queuing at the fuel pump in the village of Mahawel, about 80km south of the capital, which was crowded amid chronic fuel shortages.

The explosion wrecked at least three cars but did not hurt any of the police or soldiers manning the checkpoint a little further down the road.

Police said the blast appeared to target the petrol station, although the motive was unclear. Insurgents frequently attack Iraqi police and troops whom they accuse of working with U.S.-led forces they want out of the country.

Militants abducted three senior Iraqi officials, beheaded a man who worked for the US military and killed at least four others, officials said yesterday, a day after a US general warned that insurgents may be planning "horrific" attacks ahead of Jan. 30 elections.

Air Force Brig. Gen. Erv Lessel, a senior deputy for Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the top US commander in Iraq, said American leaders expected a rise in attacks before the election, but they had no intelligence indicating specific plots.

"I think a worst case is where they have a series of horrific attacks that cause mass casualties in some spectacular fashion in the days leading up to the elections," Lessel said Friday.

"If you look over the last six months, they have steadily escalated the barbaric nature of the attacks they have been committing. A year ago, you didn't see these kinds of horrific things."

In Washington, President Bush said the elections will be "an incredibly hopeful experience" despite rising violence and doubts that the vote will bring stability and democracy. He acknowledged security problems in four of Iraq's 18 provinces.

"I know it's hard but it's hard for a reason," Bush said.

The comments came amid an escalating insurgency believed to be led by minority Sunnis, who dominated the country during Saddam Hussein's regime. In the election the first democratic vote in Iraq since the country was formed in 1932, the Sunnis are certain to lose their dominance to the Shias, who comprise 60 percent of Iraq's 26 million people.

Reflecting Shias' demands to hold the vote as scheduled and Sunnis' calls for a boycott or postponement, two senior religious leaders expressed sharply differing views during Friday prayers.

"We want all the Iraqis to participate, we also insist on holding the elections as scheduled and to put these elections behind us as a way to end the conflict in Iraq," Saad Aldeen al-Qubbanji, a leader of a prominent Shia party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, said in the southern city of Najaf.

But Sheikh Mahmoud Al-Somaidie

Palestinians vote

FROM PAGE 12

Palestinian territories and... we will work towards this again. I am optimistic that there will be an agreement."

Militant groups such as the Islamist movement Hamas have been upset by Abbas's open criticism during the campaign of the use of weapons during the four-year Palestinian uprising, or intifada.

Barghuti, meanwhile, is trying to position himself as the unofficial opposition leader.

"If we win this election, we will lead this country to a better future. If we don't, I am already the leader of the democratic opposition movement and I will continue in that role," he told reporters in Jerusalem before his detention Friday.

Some 1.8 million Palestinians over the age of 18 have the right to vote, although the central elections commission said only around 1.3 million have signed up.

They will post their ballots in 1,074 voting centres in 16 districts in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The polling booths will open at 7:00 am (0500 GMT) Sunday and close 12 hours later.

Hartal

FROM PAGE 1

On yesterday's hartal, Bhuiyan, also the LGRD and cooperatives minister, said the front organisations of the main opposition Awami League called it ahead of the Saarc Summit, which was scheduled to begin today.

He blamed the AL for calling hartal before every international programme and arrival of a foreign dignitary with a motive to tarnish the country's image. He expressed the hope that the AL will shun this practice.

In reply to a question about the AL's recent peaceful programmes, Bhuiyan said, "We thought they returned to democratic means. But they have proved they still believe in the politics of destruction by calling the hartal without any reasonable issue."

Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation Sadeque Hossain Khoka, MP and BNP central leader Syed Emran Saleh Prince were present.

Workers blast

FROM PAGE 1

Participants carried black flags and a banner that read 'Save the garment workers from fire'.

"Government and factory owners' indifference to enforcing safety rules leads to recurrent accidents in garment factories that cause tragic deaths of workers," said NIGWF General Secretary Amirul Haque Amin.

Authorities are indifferent to the safety of workers' lives, while 290 workers have met tragic death, 1,671 sustained serious injuries and 32 major fire incidents occurred at garment factories since 1990, said the speakers.

"Most of the owners do not keep alternative exit stairs and fire extinguishers. Regular checking of electric equipment is also absent," said Amirul Haque Amin, adding, "They keep the gates locked during work hours."

"The owner of Shaan Knitting has resorted to pre-planned killings to get away without paying the workers Tk 1 crore in arrears of five months' wage and overtime bills," alleged Baharun Sultan Bahar.

Besides, the incident will enable the owner to get insurance money, he added.

Senior Vice-president of the federation Shahida Sarkar demanded representation of workers' bodies in the committee to probe the incident.

The federation leaders demanded immediate arrest of those responsible for Thursday night's tragedy.

Bringing back

FROM PAGE 12

the male otter went missing on November 15 last year. The otters usually breed twice in a year and the breeding process takes three to four months.

The turtles of the WRC, the only centre of its kind in the country, also laid eggs, which are about to break. The Hilly Moyna and Titir are too young to breed but they are expected to do so in next rainy season. The WRC is also sheltering a female rabbit, 50 species of butterfly, 10 species of reptile and four species of Amphibia in their natural habitats.

An Egyptian vulture today joins the wildlife family, while initiatives for bringing a swallow-water-crocodile, a critically endangered crocodile species, a species of spotted deer and Maya Horin from India have already been taken.

"The animals are continuing their normal activities in the friendly atmosphere of the WRC with some species breeding and some are about to breed. This encourages us to shelter more species here," said Associate Professor Mostufa Firoz, chairman of the zoology department.

Moreover, four master's students are conducting research at the WRC, which was established on JU campus on October 17, 2004 with the objective of working on wildlife management and breeding endangered species. Students of zoology are using the place as their field laboratory.

Business leaders

FROM PAGE 1

Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) President Abdul Awal Mintoo, Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) President Kutubuddin Ahmed and former BGMEA presidents Gulam Qudus and Quazi Moniruzzaman came to the BGMEA office yesterday and sympathised with the enraged apparel-men.

Following a writ petition filed by one MA Masud on November 30 last, the Court of Second Assistant Judge, Dhaka passed an order directing the government to appoint an administrator to take over the BGMEA executive committee to conduct its election slated for February 17.

Acting on the order, the government on Thursday appointed Mohammad Ayub Miah, a joint secretary at the industries ministry, as administrator of the country's largest business association.

Meanwhile, Commerce Minister Altaf Hossain Choudhury told journalists yesterday if the leaders of Forum, Sammilito Parishad and Oikya Jote -- the three panels that took part in the last BGMEA election -- want, he will sit with them to settle the issue.

The BGMEA leadership said they may sit with the minister after the administrator is withdrawn.

They asked all BGMEA members to come to its office at 8:00am today to meet the administrator at bay.

DEMONSTRATION AT KARWANBAZAR

Leaders and members of the BGMEA kept vigil in front of its Karwan Bazar office right from the dawn yesterday. As the day progressed, more and more business leaders joined them.

They chanted slogan against "conspirators who are trying to come to power through the back door with the help of the government." They burned effigies of Muzaffar Uddin Siddiqui and Fazle

Azim who they alleged had orchestrated "the farce to topple the elected committee".

Addressing the agitating business people, FBCCI chief Mintoo said the government must withdraw the administrator within 48 hours. "The government should not interfere in the internal affairs of private trade bodies. The government appointing an administrator to run a trade body is not a good omen at all," he said.

The government should promote and facilitate activities of a trade body not control it, Mintoo added.

MCCI chief Kutubuddin Ahmed, who is also a former BGMEA president, said appointment of an administrator would dampen the interests of buyers in Bangladesh garment products. "If they come to know there is an unrest in the BGMEA, they may avoid placing orders in Bangladesh. It means, the exports may be hampered in a sector that accounts for 75 percent of the country's total export," Ahmed said.

In an oblique reference to the 'conspirators', he said, "Do not try to come to the BGMEA through the back door, come through an election."

Tipu Munshi, former vice-president, and Fazlul Haque, former vice-president of BGMEA from Chittagong region, also spoke at the gathering.

LEGAL DEVELOPMENT

Four BGMEA directors yesterday appeared before the court concerned with power of attorney to contest the November 30 suit. They are ABM Shamsuddin, Ferdous Amin, Ferdous Parves Bivon and Shaiful Islam.

Their counsels filed petitions to allow them to submit a written objection against the plaintiff's application for injunction. But they withdrew the petition later without mentioning any reason.

The defence counsels also submitted petitions for certified copies of the ruling.

Zim avoid

FROM PAGE 1

of the morning when speedster Mashrafe-Bin-Mortuza uprooted the off-stump of Hamilton Masakadza.

Although the Narail quick was erratic on Friday, the right-armed with a controlled burst of speed got the right result removing Masakadza with delivery that nipped back and knocked over the batsman's off-stump.

Mashrafe also picked up his second wicket just before lunch by having the other overnight batsman Brendan Taylor leg before for 39.

Zimbabwe went into lunch at 154-6 but when they returned the complexion of the game changed with Taibu and his partner Chigumbura applying the skill of patience and stubbornness to avoid the follow-on target of 289.

The pair started slowly and added 81 runs in the second session without further damage. The only chance Bangladesh got to break the partnership was when young left-arm spinner Enamul Haque, who bowled magnificently, enticed Taibu to edge while on 47 but Nafees Iqbal at silly mid-off failed to react quick enough.

Both batsmen cut loose after tea before Mohammad Rafique finally ended the resistance removing Chigumbura with his stock delivery. Having hit ten fours and sweeping a six off Enamul in his career best knock in 164 balls spanning 216 minutes, the tall Zimbabwean all-rounder tried to cut the ace left-arm spinner but edged the ball to wicketkeeper Khaled Mashud.

Rafique, who finished the day with 4-64 from 37 overs after including a very impressive last spell of 7-3-9-2, also denied Taibu from getting what would have been his maiden Test century.

The diminutive Zimbabwe captain, dropped by Aftab Ahmed at backward point off the bowling of Tapash Baisya on 79, was adjudged lbw in the day's penultimate over.

Taibu, whose previous best was 83 against the West Indies, struck 13 boundaries in a valiant effort lasting six hours.

11 killed

FROM PAGE 12

One of the assaults was also killed by Ziauddin's guards, Balooch said.

Rampaging mobs set fire to several government and private buildings and also torched the home of forest officer Taighun Nabi, burning him and five members of his family to death, deputy commission Balooch said.

In another attack, local health department chief doctor Sher Wali was trapped in his office and shot by the mob, his cousin Badar Munir said.

A male passer-by was also hit and died as the mobs shot randomly in the streets, said another senior local official, Jamil Ahmed.

The city was tense as troops enforced the curfew with orders to shoot on sight anyone caught outside, residents said.

Gilgit, the gateway town to the Himalayan and Karakoram peaks in the region officially designated as the Northern Areas, has a population of 120,000 mainly Shia and Sunni Muslim communities.

Saturday's disturbances were the worst since June last year when several people were killed in sectarian violence in the region which has frequently witnessed clashes between rival groups from the two communities.

Sectarian tensions linked to extremist groups from majority Sunni and minority Shia communities have plagued Pakistan resulting in the death of more than 4,000 people over a decade.

President Pervez Musharraf has repeatedly vowed to stamp out the sectarian violence and his administration has carried out extensive crackdowns against the fanatical elements of the two communities.

Strengthen links

FROM PAGE 12

Brahmanbaria and part of Comilla district.

The upazilas and municipalities included B Baria sadar, Akhaura, Bancharampur, Ashaganj, Sarail, Kosba, Comilla municipality, Laksham and Langkoat.

During the separate meetings, the prime minister wanted to know from the party lower orders about the progress of development and organisational activities in the respective areas.

Lawmakers from Comilla and Brahmanbaria Akbar Hossain, Ukil Abdus Sattar, Monirul Huq, Anwarul Azim, Abdul Gafur, Harun-or-Rashid, Mosfiqur Rahman and Abdul Khaled also had separate meetings with the prime minister.

Tamil Tiger chief

FROM PAGE 12

Tigers have become a highly-disciplined and highly-motivated guerrilla force.

Tension has already been rising since the rebels Wednesday accused government security forces of preventing private donations from getting to temporary shelters in rebel areas holding tsunami survivors -- claims which the government denied.

The two sides have observed a truce since February 2002, but Norwegian-backed peace talks have been on hold since April 2003. Despite the deadlock in negotiations, both sides have pledged to respect the ceasefire.

Talks fail to resolve

FROM PAGE 1

the legality of such appointments, he added.

ACC Chairman Justice Sultan Hossain Khan and Commissioner Maniruddin Ahmed however supported the cabinet secretary's suggestion, though their support did not yield any decision.

Khan later told journalists, "We need about 100 employees right now to keep the commission operating. The government has already given us 36 staff and we hope we can take 50 to 60 people from the Bac to fill up the blanks."

Hussain suggested hiring experts from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to lay out the ACC's organogram. The bank is interested in doing that, he said. He also expressed the opinion that the ACC could hire more consultants to work on different issues.

All the three members of the ACC opposed this view. They said they do not think the ACC needs any consultant right now as they can design the organogram by themselves, meeting sources said.

"The ACC members suspect the administration wants to hold sway over the ACC through consultants from the ADB, where they have a lot of control," said an ACC source.

He also noted that the commission members differ among themselves over the issue of organogram. "Miah is designated to look after the establishment and administration. He has framed an organogram outlining nearly 900 positions across the country. On the other hand, the former Bac officials submitted to the ACC an organogram with about 1,800 staff. Miah believes his organogram is good enough while the chairman and the other commissioner believe there is room for rethinking about it."

After the meeting, ACC Chairman Khan told the press, "The organogram will have to be prepared in the light of the law. It will take some time."

On interpretation of the ACC Act regarding the Bac staff, the cabinet

secretary held fast to his earlier view, as manifested in last week's government circular.

The ACC chair did not support or oppose this interpretation nor did he point at the different interpretation given by the attorney general, according to which, the ACC Act puts the Bac staff under the commission right on the dissolution of the bureau. Rather, Khan noted that Miah opposes the attorney general's interpretation.

The issue remained unresolved.

Khan later told the press, "Which interpretation is correct is to be determined by the court." When asked if the ACC would go to the court on this question, he said, "No, it will not be correct to go to the court. We have a manpower shortage. This problem will be resolved when we get adequate manpower."

The cabinet secretary yesterday agreed to the commission's demand to withdraw Reza-e-Rabbi, who was appointed unilaterally by the government as the ACC secretary.

He said the commission should name three or four competent people against the position so that the government can approve one of them for the ACC to appoint.

To that, Khan replied, "We do not know many people. Why don't you suggest some names?"

But Miah opposed, "That will not be proper. We do can propose some names."

In the end, the meeting resolved that a secretary would be appointed within the next 15 days.

"We have made some progress at the meeting. There was a lack of coordination, which has been addressed to some extent," Khan told journalists on the outcome of the meeting.

Hussain, on the other hand, told the press, "There was no lack of coordination here. We were reviewing the structure of the ACC. This is a new type of organisation. It will take some time to make it effective. It is now organising itself. When complete, it will start anti-corruption activities."

Fireball leaps 300ft

FROM PAGE 1

"Like the Magurghara incident, there was no monitoring of the exploration activities here. We know many gas structures in Sylhet are volatile and not all foreign operators are as well-informed about these structures as we are," he said.

"The Tengratia field also gave a shallow kick of gas pressure that was experienced at Magurghara. This is the sign of volatility, which the Niko's drilling operators failed to pay proper attention to."

"But the biggest fault of Niko is that like Occidental, which in Magurghara had drilled through an improper well casing (made of concrete), Niko also made a casing of 300 metres but went on drilling up to 800 metres without any stable structure," the expert pointed out.

But Niko's Operations Manager Peter Mercier insisted that it was not possible to know the cause of the explosion at the moment. "The incident may have taken place due to the high pressure of the well head. We will have to wait till the fire goes out automatically," he told The Daily Star at a spot two kilometres off the burning gas field.

"We had a target of drilling 1,700 metres. But the disaster occurred after drilling about 800 metres on Friday night. We had tried to avert the accident by firing a flare line within an hour of the abnormal behaviour of the well," he said.

The state minister for energy said they will form an enquiry committee after returning to Dhaka. He declined to comment on the reasons for the explosion, saying: "I would not comment before the committee reaches its own conclusions."

Niko is now trying to mobilise a drilling-rig, owned by Barker, to bring the fire under control. But it will take a few weeks to bring the rig, which was used in Bangura under Block 9, from Chittagong Port.

Experts from abroad are also coming to assist in this emergency operation, according to the Petrobangla chairman.

However, the Niko operations manager was unable to give any details of when the company will be able to start remedial measures. "After the situation comes under total control, we will start work for drilling a relief well for linking with lower zones of the main well. It would be about 500 metres off the main well," Mercier said.

Thirty-seven engineers, technicians and workers, including 22 foreigners, were working on the gas field before the fire took place. Foreigners have now been shifted to safer places.

The Bangladesh Rifles from the nearby outposts along with the police have been deployed two kilometres away from the gas field.

In a further twist, it is alleged that the gas field itself was arbitrarily given to Niko in October 2003 violating government rules.

Niko, which committed to

invest \$15 million in the field, had deployed a drilling company which is represented by a top leader of a certain bhaban. It is alleged that this person had earlier forced Petrobangla to award it this gas field area along with two other gas fields in Feni and Kamta through a joint venture with Bapex.

Once considered by Petrobangla unsuitable for gas exploration, Niko is the only foreign oil company to operate in Bangladesh without any Production Sharing Contract (PSC).

Niko was given this field despite it having been ring-fenced for future operations by Petrobangla, and US company Unocal had the first right to get exploration right as it operated in that area. The oil company was disqualified by Petrobangla's evaluation in the second round block bidding in 1997.

Though Bapex is 40 percent stakeholder in this venture, none of its staff was at the location, sources said.

There was also no Petrobangla representation to oversee the operations at this gas field even after the Magurghara experience and with the gas fields in Sylhet showing a tendency to show sudden pressures.

The US company Occidental was found responsible for the Magurghara explosion, but the company was allowed to sell out its concerns to Unocal and leave Bangladesh in 1999 following an extension of its PSC through a supplementary contract.

Petrobangla demanded \$685 million in compensation for damages from Unocal in 2002, but Unocal so far has not paid anything. Instead the company claimed that the compensation has been "paid" through the supplementary contract. As per Petrobangla estimate, the field had a gas reserve of over 245 billion cubic feet.

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Robbers shoot one dead

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Robbers shot dead a person and injured 10 others after looting four houses in Dharmapur village in Satkania upazila in the early hours yesterday.

The dead was Forok Mia, 35, son of Syed Ahmad.

Sources said up to 20 robbers committed robbery in four houses belonging to Akkas Mia, Manju, Mahmudul Hasan and Siddiq Mahmud in Dharmapur at about 1:00am. They looted gold ornaments and other valuables reportedly worth about Tk 5 lakh.

As the robbers were preparing to storm more houses, the villagers encircled and chased them.

The criminals before fleeing opened fire on them, leaving Forok killed on the spot and the others injured.

Search on, workers

FROM PAGE 1

Sub-inspector Zayed Hossain filed a case and the OC took the responsibility of investigation.

Six of the 23 dead were identified, OC Abdur Rashid said. But he could not give their names.

The unidentified body retrieved yesterday was under a pile of burnt papers, he said.

Fire service sources however said last night they had no information about the recovery.

Probe

Firefighters suspect the fire originated from an electric short circuit.

A probe committee will be formed today to look into how the fire broke out, and estimate the damage it caused, said Selim Nawaz Bhuiyan, assistant director (Dhaka Division) of Fire Brigade and Civil Defence.

UNB says the Directorate of Inspection of Factories yesterday formed an enquiry committee headed by Manzoor Kader.

Villagers Mourn

The employees and workers of the gutted factory and people of the villages nearby are in a state of shock in the wake of the tragic incident. Hundreds of locals yesterday flocked to the factory site with tears rolling down their eyes. Crowds of mourners gathered at the houses of the victims who died or were missing.

Family members of the dead were seen weeping for their loved ones while families of the missing ones were anxiously searching for them.

Compensation

Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) will give Tk one lakh each to the families of the dead.

A press release of the BKMEA yesterday said their family members will be given jobs if found suitable.

The association will also bear medical expenses of the injured and

of the Sunnis' Association of Muslim Scholars favored postponing the vote.

"We all want elections, but we are seeking fair and free elections," he said in Baghdad. "Those of us who are calling for postponement are seeking that for the benefit of the country. Elections have to be an Iraqi demand, not the demand of the foreign countries."

The United States insists on holding the vote as scheduled and strongly opposes a postponement.

This week has seen a string of assassinations, suicide car bombings and other assaults that killed nearly 100 people, mostly Iraqi security forces, who are seen by the militants as collaborators with the American occupiers.

Authorities in Saddam's hometown of Tikrit said Saturday that gunmen abducted a deputy governor of a central Iraqi province and two other senior officials as they traveled to meet with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most prominent Shia leader, in the holy city of Najaf to discuss national elections.

The delegation was stopped and the members kidnapped about 40 miles south of Baghdad on Friday. The area is in the so-called "triangle of death," a string of Sunni-controlled towns that have been the scene of frequent attacks.

The US military said the delegation was traveling in two cars one of which managed to escape the militants' ambush.