

Bush issues war of words to Iran, Syria

AP, Brussels

US President Bush appealed to Europe yesterday to move beyond animosities over Iraq and join forces in encouraging democratic reforms across the Middle East. He also prodded Russia to reverse a crack-down on political dissent, demanded that Iran end its nuclear ambitions and told Syria to get out of Lebanon.

Bush did not rule out using military force in Iran, saying all options remain on the table. But, addressing widespread concerns in Europe that Iran is the next US target after Iraq, Bush said: "Iran is ... different from Iraq. We're in the early stages of diplomacy."

Bush's speech on a five-day fence-mending trip to Europe was aimed at both US and European audiences. "In a new century, the alliance of America and Europe is the main pillar of our security," he said.

He used the word "alliance" 12 times in his speech to underscore his aim to repair relations frayed by the war in Iraq. But not all his speech was conciliatory.

Bush had pointed criticism for Russia three days ahead of a meeting with President Vladimir Putin in Slovakia. Referring to Putin's recent steps to consolidate power, rollback democratic reforms and curb press and political freedoms, Bush said:

"We must always remind Russia that our alliance stands for a free press, a vital opposition, the sharing of power and the rule of law. The United States should place democratic reform at the heart of their dialogue with Russia."

Bush's speech was delivered in an ornate ballroom of Brussels' Concert Noble hall before an audience of business leaders, academics and diplomats. It was greeted mostly by subdued applause.

He was having a private dinner later Monday with French President Jacques Chirac, one of his harshest critics on Iraq. His trip also included stops in Germany and Slovakia.

Bush urged greater "tangible political, economic and security

assistance to the world's newest democracy," Iraq. And he called for European allies to stand by fledgling democracy movements throughout the world, and especially in the Middle East.

He said he recognized that full democracy could take awhile to root. Even in the United States, democracy came slowly, Bush said, pointing out that women and minorities were not treated equally "and that struggle hasn't ended."

Bush had sharp words for Syria, calling on leaders in Damascus to withdraw its forces from Lebanon. As Bush spoke, thousands of opposition supporters in Beirut shouted insults at Syria and demanded the resignation of Lebanon's pro-Syrian government, marking a week since the assassination of Rafik Hariri, Lebanon's most prominent politician.

The United States has withdrawn its ambassador from Syria for consultations to protest a suspected link between the assassination and Syria.

"The Lebanese people have the right to be free, and the United States and Europe share an interest in an independent, democratic Lebanon," Bush said.

On Iran, Bush said the United States was working with European allies Britain, France and Germany on a diplomatic solution to end Iran's nuclear program. His administration, however, has been skeptical of the Europeans' approach to offer Iran economic and political incentives not to develop nuclear arms.

"The results of this approach now depend largely on Iran," Bush said. "The time has arrived for the Iranian regime to listen to the Iranian people and respect their rights and join in the movement toward liberty that is taking place all around them."

And he had pointed advice for two pivotal US allies in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Ekushey tradition

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When contacted, Vice Chancellor SMA Faiz said microphone operators informed him they did it to avoid the English 'hello'. "I will ask the DU official who is in charge of microphone service to explain the matter," he added.

DU Teachers' Association (Duta) and Pragotishil Chhatra Jote (PCJ), a combine of some left-leaning student bodies, have demanded a probe into the incident.

Amar Ekushey 2005 Udapan Kendriyo Samannoy Committee Coordinator and Duta President AAMS Arefin Siddique said, "We have asked the vice chancellor to find out who was responsible for this. I think it was a provocation."

PCJ leaders at a press conference said recitation from the Quran at the Shaheed Minar on the eve of Amar Ekushey and the International Mother Language Day was not proper since not only Muslims but also people of other religions gather at the venue to pay tributes to language martyrs.

They also submitted a memorandum to the VC demanding action against the persons responsible.

Saifur unhappy

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and conveyed his concerns about the upcoming Washington meeting to the EU external affairs commissioner.

"I told the external affairs commissioner that the EU initiative to hold this Washington meeting is conceptually wrong," Saifur said. "It could have been held in Bangladesh, or at least, we could have been invited."

The finance minister alleged that a group 'patronised by the opposition' feeds the EC with wrong information about Bangladesh.

"This has created an unhealthy attitude among some European countries about Bangladesh," he said. "As a result they do not look at Bangladesh in an appropriate perspective. In most cases, they draw conclusions without going to the depth."

"But the EC is an institution. It should not accept any information without verification," he maintained.

A number of burning issues came up during his meeting with the commissioners. These include deaths in 'crossfire', rise of Islamic militants, law and order situation and formation of a human rights commission.

"The commissioners talked about communal problems in Bangladesh. I asked them back: Where did they see communal problem in our country? They also asked me why women wear veils (burkha). I told them that the nuns in their countries also wear veils, which does not seem to bother them."

On the issue of the grenade attack, Saifur told the commissioners that this is a global phenomenon. Even in Spain, there had been three to four recent instances of bomb blasts, but none could be arrested.

"This is happening everywhere. When the newspapers run the headlines and you tend to jump on the issue, this is not right," the minister said.

On the question of crossfire, Saifur challenged the EC commissioners to name one country where people do not get killed in crossfire.

On the question of slow judicial pace, he told the EC that such delays happen elsewhere, too. In Ireland, a case took 18 years to be resolved and then a wrong person was convicted.

Explaining to the EC why the human rights commission has not been formed, Saifur said this is under process but Bangladesh's constitution guarantees human rights to all.

On the question of corruption, Saifur told the EC there is not a single country free from corruption. However, he told them that the government is trying to improve the situation.

Saifur believes his meetings with the EC commissioners will help change the EU's perspective about Bangladesh. "Our ambassadors will follow up my visit to maintain the positive impression that I left with them," he claimed.

During his visit to Jeddah, Saifur met Islamic Development Bank (IDB) executives and was assured of \$1 billion in assistance in energy, fertiliser import and infrastructure.

"Our relationship with the IDB became cold from 1997 because we did not maintain relationship with it from a high level of the government," he noted.

Saifur was also present at the signing of a \$60 million loan agreement between Bangladesh and the IDB for fibre-optic cable installation between Dhaka and Cox's Bazar.

JP to witness further split

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

The expelled presidium member of Jatiya Party (JP), Sardar Amzad Hossain, yesterday called a special council of the party on February 24 to decide about formation of a new JP faction.

"We'll either form a new JP faction or join the Awami League-led 14-party to accelerate people's movement. Councilors will decide everything," Amzad told a press conference at a city restaurant.

Amzad called the council as their four-point demand was ignored, he said.

The demands include withdrawal of Amzad's expulsion orders, removal of JP Secretary General Ruhul Amin Hawladar and introducing democratic practice in the party.

"Front-line JP leaders who have been deprived of privileges for long will join the council from across the country," Amzad said.

He claimed JP Chairman HM Ershad, influenced by Ruhul Amin, formed the party's Rajshahi district and city unit committees "illegally with fake and hired councillors" in December last year.

"The committees were formed without mainstream JP leaders of Rajshahi; similar incidents have happened elsewhere," said Amzad.

Advocate Ekramur Rasul, former Rajshahi Bar president and convener of JP Coordinating Committee, Sayed Zamal Uddin, Israfil Hossain, Abdul Aziz Mollah, Azharul Haque were present among other senior leaders of the city and upazila units.

150 feared dead

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clouds still threatened to bring more.

The recovery effort was being hindered because rescuers feared triggering further landslides by disrupting the unstable ground, she added.

The dumpsite was located on top of a hill above the homes and heavy rain had saturated the mountains of trash, causing the tragedy, she explained.

Second Sergeant Sudrajat from the Batujajar subdistrict police post said that while several bodies had been dragged from shattered homes at the edge of the landslide, only five people had been pulled out alive.

A policeman in Cimahi named Awan told AFP that at least 70 houses were engulfed by the landslide.

Local village chief Saiful Bagir said local authorities had promised on six occasions to relocate the dumpsite, deemed to be a threat to the homes, but had not done so, Indosiar television reported.

Landslides are relatively common in Indonesia during the rainy season, especially on the most populated and mountainous island of Java.

Last year at least 42 people were killed in West Sumatra when a landslide buried a bus under tons of soil, trees and bushes.

Grenade blast

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A team of Bangladesh Army's explosive experts from Comilla had visited the scene and recovered splinters from the spot. Team leader Captain Manjur confirmed it to be a hand grenade.

Police and locals said the grenade exploded at about 8:15pm sometime after a few thousand people had left Prithimpasa Nawab Bari where the local Shia community arranged an Ashura programme. The venue stands only 200 yards off the scene of the blast.

Maruf, who hailed from Haluaghat of Mymensingh, is Imam of the local mosque and a student of Karmadha Madrasa while Qamrul is a teacher of Darus Salam Madrasa in Sylhet.

Besides the two, police held a woman at Budhpasa village on suspicion that her son could be another accomplice of Maruf and Qamrul.

Raushan Ara Begum, superintendent of Moulvibazar police, who visited the spot last night, told The Daily Star that police and army personnel are jointly investigating the incident.

DU student

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Students rushed him to Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) where doctors pronounced him dead. He hailed from Shyamkur village in Maheshpur upazila in Jhenidah.

Students of the dormitory said Kabir first tried to take his life by cutting his throat with a knife. As he failed, he jumped from the roof, one of them said, adding, he saw Kabir on the rooftop with a towel wrapped around his neck.

He also took 30 sleeping pills last week, said teachers and students, adding that his life was saved after washing his stomach at the DMCH.

Police recovered a message in Kabir's room in which he held no-one responsible for his death. Police also recovered a bloodstained knife and found blood on his pillow.

Police and friends suspect he committed suicide following a family disorder.

Nation pays homage

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Dhaka University (DU) Vice Chancellor (VC) Prof SMA Faiz and ministers and state ministers placed wreaths.

Leader of the Opposition and Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina, accompanied by top party leaders, placed wreaths at 12:15am.

Immediately after Sheikh Hasina left the Shaheed Minar premises, hundreds of people entered the Shaheed Minar from both the entrance and exit points, hampering placing of wreaths for about 10 minutes.

Doctor's Association of Bangladesh (Dab) and some other pro-government socio-cultural organisations and employees union of Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) entered the Shaheed Minar from the exit point in violation of the rules, but the law enforcers did not put any barricade.

Later the DU VC with the help of law enforcers and Bangladesh National Cadet Corps (BNCC) brought the situation under control.

People from all walks of life including political parties, socio-cultural organisations, students and professional bodies stood in a long queue to place wreaths at the foot of the Shaheed Minar.

Over 7,000 security personnel including Special Security Forces, Rapid Action Battalion and intelligence agencies guarded the Shaheed Minar premises and all the roads leading there from the early evening on February 21.

The day was a public holiday and the national flag was kept half-mast. Black flags were hoisted atop government, semi-government, autonomous and non-government organisation buildings and private houses across the country.

President Iajuddin Ahmed, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Opposition Leader Sheikh Hasina issued separate messages on the day.

Different government and non-government, socio-cultural and political organisations took elaborate programmes to observe the day.

State-run Bangladesh Television (BTV) telecast the wreaths-placing programme live from the Central Shaheed Minar and Bangladesh Betar aired special programmes.

Private satellite channels also telecast special programmes on the occasion.

Newspapers published special supplements highlighting the significance of the day. Many dailies also arranged publication of today's issue on special arrangement as the day was a public holiday.

Among the hundreds of organisations who placed wreaths at the Shaheed Minar were Dhaka University Journalists' Association, Dhaka City Corporation, Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal, AL-backed Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh, Gono Forum, Jatiya Press Club, Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists, Dhaka Reporters' Unity, Crime Reporters' Association, Bangladesher Workers' Party, Samajtantrik Chhatra Front, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), JSD-backed BCL, Bhasha Shaheed Abdul Jabbar Parishad, Shaheed Barkat Parishad, Ekattarer Ghatok-Dalal Nirmul Committee, Bangladesh Udichi Shipi Gosthi, Tripura Students' Forum-Bangladesh, Bangladesh Marma Students' Council, Bangladesh Chhatra Moltree, Pahari Chhatra Parishad, Pragotishil Chhatra Jote, Bangladesh Chhatra Union, Dhaka Mahanagari Rickshaw Chalak Kalyan Samity, Bangladesh Muktiyoddha Sangshad, Bangladesh Muktiyoddha Sangshad Kendrio Command, Zia Sangskritik Sangathan, Sramik Krishak Samajbadi Dal, Bangladesh Buddhist Federation, Panacea Foundation, Bangladesh Chhatra Federation, Biplobi Chhatra Maitree, Dhaka University Film Society, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Bangladesh Christian Association and many other political, socio-cultural and student organisations, educational institutions, families and individuals.

Hasina

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police and Rab. The government also engaged Bangla Bhai to kill our party leaders," she alleged.

Hasina said the BNP-Jamaat government is not holding trial of the killers, rather it is patronising the killers. "What kind of country we are living in ... There must be a limit to barbarism."

"There is no rule of law in the country ... everywhere there is an autocratic attitude. The government is engaged in plundering state-wealth," she said.

Hasina narrated how the plights of people aggravated with the unabated price hike of essentials and repression unleashed on them. "People are sufferings due to the sins being committed by the prime minister."

Singapore

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added benefits of its cosmopolitan outlook and the extent to which English is spoken make it a very easy location for an expatriate to assimilate into," Quane said in a statement.

Singapore also shaded Tokyo and Hong Kong in the crucial area of air pollution, Quane said, while the Japanese capital further lost out because of its susceptibility to earthquakes.

In order from number four to 10, the other most livable Asian cities for expatriates were: Macau, Kuala Lumpur, Bandar Seri Begawan, Taipei, Bangkok, Seoul and Beijing.

At the other end of the scale, the Bangladesh capital of Dhaka won the gong for the least livable city, just ahead of Karachi.

"Dhaka is plagued by instability and poor infrastructure and the strains upon foreigners are increasing," the findings of the survey said.

The survey ranks 38 cities according to categories that include climate, prevalence and impact of natural disasters, health facilities and risks, transportation, accommodation standards, education, recreation, and crime.

Dhaka to consider

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He said the Bangladesh mission in Baghdad was never shut down, it was temporarily suspended because of law and order at the time.

In reply to a question, Khan said Bangladesh will be happy to take part in the reconstruction of Iraq in a conducive environment.

Before 1990, he mentioned, around 2.5 lakh Bangladeshis had been employed in construction of roads and infrastructure in Iraq.

Asked about any development in rescheduling the stalled Saarc summit, the foreign minister said, "I think the incumbent Saarc chair, Pakistan, is in discussion with member-countries to find a convenient date for the summit. But we've not yet received any formal request to host the summit."

The scheduled February 6-7 summit of the seven-nation forum was put off after India expressed their inability to attend it, citing political developments in Nepal and "security concerns" in Dhaka.

WB to provide

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The poor will be given vouchers to purchase health services from an accredited provider of their choice.

"If successful, the use of health vouchers could result in a significant reallocation of public funds towards the health needs of the poor people," an official of the health ministry said.

To achieve these objectives, the programme will focus on three major reform areas: (i) strengthening public health sector management and stewardship capacity through development of pro-poor targeting measures as well as strengthening sector-wide governance mechanisms; (ii) health sector diversification, through the development of new delivery channels for publicly and non-publicly provided services; (iii) stimulating demand for essential services by poor households through health advocacy.

The HNPSP is also supported by a large group of development partners, who will together contribute about one third of the costs of \$ 3 billion over the next 5 years.

UN declares

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official on condition of anonymity.

"The security alert will continue until a further directive is made," he said.

Another official said a level-1 caution is not alarming. "It becomes alarming when the level reaches 3," he told BDNEWS.

About 800 officials, including locals and foreigners, have been working in the UN offices in Bangladesh.

The UN bodies active in the country are UNDP, UNFPA, Who, UNHCR, WFP, Unesco, Fao, ILO, Unicef, UNAIDS, Unep and Unic.

On October 28, the UN announced the level-2 security warning for Cox's Bazar restricting movement of its staff and their family members in the district.

The level-2 alert was clamped after Mehnaz Khan, a field officer of the World Food Program (WFP), was manhandled by Rohingya refugees at Kutupalong camp.

12 militants held

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"Each of them was carrying a bag," Tareq Kamal, officer-in-charge of the Dhamrai Police Station, told reporters.

Searching their bags, police found pieces of glass, five diaries and a notebook, dresses for girls, masks, fake beards and moustaches, wigs and bomb-making formulas complete with drawings.

Police said all of the youths were wearing lungis and pajamas,, but that each carried with them two extra dresses. Police also found three pairs of shoes, muri (fried rice), cakes, soft drinks and bottles of drinking water.

The youths claimed they were returning from a feast at one Delwar Hossain's house, but police could not find anyone by that name in the area, raising doubts about the youth's motives for roaming the highway at night.

They identified the two who fled as Nantu and Salam.

Local sources said Wahab, a resident of Kayetpara in Dhamrai, is the leader of the team. His brother Jahangir Alam, a grocer at Dhamrai Bazar, expressed ignorance about his brother's occupation when speaking with reporters.

A police source said the arrested disclosed the names of eight members of 'their people'.

Local police officials suspected, based on the recovered items, that the youths were preparing to undertake an operation.

Several police sources said the extremists have a safe den somewhere in the area, where they are training young members.

Reporters have not been permitted to speak with the arrestees.

JU CAPTURE

At approximately 8:00pm on Sunday, JU Assistant Proctor Qamruzzaman Monir challenged three youths wearing panjabi and pajamas during a function on the occasion of International Mother Language Day at the university Shaheed Minar.

The youths, who claimed to be students of Dhaka College, were recording the cultural function on an audio cassette.

But the JU authorities later learned that two of the young men, Aminul Islam and Salabuddin Rana, are students of Pallabi Aftab Uddin Madarsa, while the other, Taha Ibne Hasan, is a student of Bhawal Badre Alam College in Gazipur.

"As we asked about their motive, they gave us contradictory statements," JU Proctor Muhammad Ali Akond Mamun told The Daily Star last night.

The JU authorities found a cassette containing a speech of an unknown religious cleric who defended Osama bin Laden, Mufti Amini and Shaikhul Hadith, saying anti-Islamic forces failed to arrest them despite repeated attempts. The speech had been recorded a few days earlier.

Finding a timer with them, the JU authorities handed them over to the Savar police.

They arrested mentioned names of two JU students. Sajana, a resident student of AFM Kamaluddin Hall, and Panna of Meer Moshurraf Hossain Hall.

The young men told police during an interrogation at the Savar Police Station yesterday that they went to the university to enjoy the programme. They failed, however, to give a satisfactory answer for carrying a timer.

JOYPURHAT

Police arrested three extremists of Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) from Kalai and Sadar upzila of Joypurhat.

They are Golam Mostafa and Delwar Hossain of Baniapara of the

Sadar upzila and Sobhan, alias Salauddin, of Belghar village under Kalai.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Joypurhat Police Station OC Iqbal Shafi confirmed the arrestees to be members of militant groups.

"Two of them were arrested earlier in connection with an attack on police at Maheshpur village under Khetlal upzila in 2003, but were later released on bail a couple of months ago," he said, adding that Mostafa is also an accused in the bomb attack in Dinajpur.

A number of books related to revolution were seized from Delwar.

Kalai police suspect Sobhan was involved in the bomb attack at the Brac office at Kalai Sadar last week.

VIGILANCE

Police high ups recently deployed members of intelligence agencies to the listed mosques in the Northern region, hoping to ascertain which clerics were known to deliver ultra-religious statements and preach Jihad, a top official in the police headquarters said seeking anonymity. Sources said intelligence members have also been deployed at various mosques in the Sylhet and Khulna regions.

"The intelligence mounted watch in the mosques where disciples of the operation commander of Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) and Dr Asadullah Galib of Rajshahi University are carrying out activities and discharging duties as Imam," said a top police official seeking anonymity. Intelligence members have also been ordered to arrest the zealots and thoroughly interrogate them.

Local intelligence agencies, meanwhile, have been kept in the dark for unknown reasons and were not tasked with making arrests, the official said. Possibly the government has taken such move because JMJB operation commander Bangla Bhai is eluding arrest despite the Prime Minister's ordered to arrest him, he noted.

The order was given after a special meeting on security held at the Ministry of Home on Thursday, during which the recent bomb attacks on NGOs was given priority, a ministry source said.

Chaired by State Minister for Home Luthfozzaman Babar, the meeting was attended by Inspector General of Police and chiefs of various intelligence agencies.

Police arrested three activists of Jama'atul Mujahidin from the Water Development Board mosque in Thakurgaon on Thursday night. The arrestees are Amanat Ullah, Mamun ur Rashid and Mahbub Alam. Following the statement police raided the house of one Asiruddin, 50, of Laxmipur village in Sadar upazila of Thakurgaon and seized bomb making materials, acid, splinters, electrical wire, batteries, a dummy rifle made of bamboo and rod, some books and leaflets as well as a motor cycle.

Police said the arrestees admitted to police that they were carrying out anti-NGO propaganda at the direction of Bangla Bhai, operation commander of Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), and Dr Asadullah Galib of Rajshahi University.

Earlier, in the first week of February, police arrested 12 members of Jama'atul Mujahidin activists from a mosque in Natore.

Superintendent of Police (SP) of Thakurgaon Khandaker Golam Faruq said there are thousands of mosques, but such activities. "It is not possible to watch every mosque by limited forces," he said.

Death toll reaches 120

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were also recovered with four rifles and 160 bullets.

Police handed over nearly 100 bodies to their relatives till yesterday afternoon.

The victims mostly hailed from Matlab and Chandpur Sadar upazilas.

Hundreds of people rushed to the riverside on hearing about the accident. Many of them waited looking for their near and dear ones among the victims.

MV Maharaj left Sadarghat terminal for Matlab in Chandpur at 10:00pm on Saturday and was caught in a tornado at about 10:45 pm. Within minutes, the launch went upside down and sank in the river.

Locals said about 50 to 60 passengers either swam ashore or trowlers, boats and sand-carrying vessels rescued them. The launch was supposed to carry up to 200 passengers at night.

BIWTA salvage vessel MV Rustam reached the spot at about 11:30 am Sunday but failed to salvage the launch that is quite big in size. Salvage vessel Hamza joined Rustam at 5:30am yesterday and they pulled up the launch at 12:30pm.

Shipping Minister Akbar Hossain blamed the accident on poor weather forecast by meteorological department. "I heard the weather forecast on Saturday. It did not mention about any tornado," he told newsmen while visiting the spot on Sunday.

A survivor of the accident, Shahidul Islam of Matlab, said, "It was raining and suddenly I found our launch upside down and myself in water."

Another survivor, Delwar Hossain, said that before the tornado, it was raining and passengers fixed tarpaulin against the windows so that rainwater could not enter the vessel. The launch capsized abruptly and most people could not come out due to the tarpaulin, he mentioned as tears rolled down his cheeks.

Trawlers and sand-carrying vessels started rescue operation immediately. But police and fire brigade men reached the spot after two hours, witnesses alleged.

Quoting local people, UNB reported that some 30 to 40 passengers might have been washed downstream in the last three days.

About 70 divers of Naval Coastguard, fire brigade units from Sadarghat, Fatullah and Narayanganj and BIWTA jointly carried out the rescue operation along with local people.

The government has formed a one-member body comprising Captain Jasimuddin Sarker, chief naval surveyor, to investigate the launch accident. It will submit its report within a week.

"The launch has fitness certificate until 14 April. Now I have to look into other things," Jasimuddin told The Daily Star.

Met office sources said they had warned for hoisting cautionary signal number 1 on Saturday. Director of BIWTA Syed Monwar Hossain told The Daily Star that the Met office instructed the river ports to hoist cautionary signal number 1 meaning the launches could ply but with caution.