

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

BIWTA

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Korea and the Netherlands.

A source in the shipping ministry said that salvage vessels would be imported under a mega project that would take at least three years' time.

"The project is now at the initial stage. It awaits the finance and planning ministry's approval," Taibur Rahman, Joint Secretary (Administration) of the shipping ministry said.

He, however, could not say when it is going to have the finance and planning ministry's nod.

A high official of BIWTA on condition of anonymity said that BIWTA has long been trying to convince successive governments of the need for importing more powerful salvage vessels, but to no effect.

Within its limited capacity, BIWTA recently has taken possession of 39 submerged vessels in a move to rescue under the wreck rule 1973 and had invited tenders in this regard, he added.

Saifur unhappy

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.

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 councilors" 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 convenor 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 Pritimpasa Nawab Bari where the local Shia community arranged an Ashura programme. The venue stands only 200 yards of the scene of the blast.

Maruf, who hailed from Haluaghat of Myremensingh, is Imam of the local mosque and a student of Karmada Madrasa while Quamrul 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 Quamrul.

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.

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.

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 enforcement 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.

Govt sleeps

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According to official figures, 3,120 people have died in 261 major launch disasters in the country since 1977. But unofficial sources say the number is significantly higher, since the government estimate includes only those bodies that have been recovered, and not those that have been washed away. Unofficial sources say the death toll, including unRecovered bodies, stands more accurately at 4,120.

It is known about the causes of these deaths, since the government has failed to publish any reports resulting from probe committees formed in the wake of previous launch disasters.

The accidents continue, thanks to the government's failure in implementing a sound and effective security mechanism.

The mobile courts set up at the Sadarghat Launch Terminal on several occasions, for example,

have been unable to check overloading of passengers and goods from being carried on deck.

Even where hints of progress have been made, efforts have come up short. The government had earlier engaged Magistrate Munir Chowdhury at the Sadarghat Launch Terminal to implement disciplinary measures following the MV Nasreen-1 launch disaster in 2003. But Munir, despite making significant progress, was withdrawn following pressure from a vested group in launch owners association.

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The ruling BNP whips have not initiated any steps to ensure a quorum on time, asking lawmakers to be present in the House on time.

"What can we do if the lawmakers are not willing to join the House?" questioned a ruling BNP whip yesterday, preferring anonymity. He said, however, they would urge the party deputies today to join the House on time and make a quorum.

A senior BNP lawmaker blamed the personal business commitment

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 suffering due to the sins being committed by the prime minister."

Hasina 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 Bangladeshi 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.

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, Tahira Ibne Hasan, is a student of Bhowali 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.

JU authorities found a cassette containing a speech of an unknown religious cleric who defended Osama bin Laden, Muffy 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 Sajan, a resident student of AFM Kamaluddin Hall, and Panna of Meer Mosharraf 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 upazila of Joypurhat.

They are Golam Mostafa and Delwar Hossain of Baniapara of the

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,