

Khaleda's remarks

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In her speech in the Jatiya Sangsad on Tuesday, the BNP chairperson denied the existence of Taliban and al-Qaeda elements in Bangladesh. She termed the reports about their activities nothing by the opposition's propaganda.

"It's a propaganda against the government and the country. And it [the propaganda] is aimed at causing a rift within the four-party alliance, Khaleda claimed, accusing the main opposition Awami League (AL) of launching the propaganda.

Jamaat-e-Islami chief Matiur Rahman Nizami on Sunday made similar comments in parliament in his speech on the thanksgiving motion on president's address.

"They (AL) want to make a rift within the four-party alliance through discovering the existence of so-called militancy. Because they (AL) know it will not be possible to win in the next election if the alliance exists," he said.

Islami Oikya Jote Chairman Fazlul Haque Amini, after the government launched a crackdown on militants last month, said in public meetings and statements that "an evil force" has launched the propaganda about Islamist militants.

Another common point in the statements of Khaleda, Nizami, Amini and others is that a section of the media is orchestrating the propaganda "to damage the country's image."

The prime minister has said Islamic organisations have long been working to spread the message of Islam and its ideology. "They've also made an important contribution to maintaining social integrity and harmony; and there's no allegation against them."

Almost identical comments came

Indian HC terms

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for full cooperation, including the issuance of necessary instructions to the Bangladesh Rifles to avoid any untoward incidents.

The statement also said fencing work by the BSF has been underway since 1989 and greater part of the fence is located at or beyond 150 yards from the zero-line on the Indian side.

"However, in specific areas mainly due to the existence of villages, or as necessitated by terrain conditions the fence had to be built within 150 yards," the Indian High Commission said in the statement. India has formally conveyed details of villages, houses and population within 150 yards of the zero-line to Bangladesh.

It also says India has consistently affirmed that the 1975 Border Guidelines relate to the demolition of defensive structures only. "They do not apply to the building of a fence, which is a physical barrier intended to stop smuggling and other illegal movements across the border. The fence has no defense potential whatsoever," the statement reads.

The statement also said India believes that a misinterpretation of the 1975 Border Guidelines, which were actually drawn up in a spirit of friendship and understanding to guide the two forces, is stalling legitimate development activity.

Child trafficking

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awareness campaign and awarding the forces for contributing to the anti-trafficking activities played a significant role in this success, he said.

Of the 86 cases selected for special monitoring since June 15, 2004, 72 have already been disposed. And, of these 72 cases, 48 ended in conviction while 24 were acquitted, Omar Farooq said.

Of the convicted, three were given the death sentence, 60 were awarded life imprisonment and 22 were given other punishments. Of the three cases related to camel jockeys, eight were given life imprisonment, he added.

"The remaining 14 cases are likely to be disposed within April of this year," Farooq noted.

The total number of pending cases was 481 till March 15, whereas the number was 571 on June 30 last year, which shows a clear decline in the number of pending cases.

The three-stage screening process at the international airports and land ports from June 15, 2004 to March 15, 2005 contributed to the prevention of 777 persons including 38 women and children from going abroad while lacking valid documents. The anti-trafficking measures also rescued 206 trafficked persons including 100 women and 98 children.

Legal action against 12 government officials for complicity in trafficking in persons is now underway, Farooq said.

Tendulkar

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his 122nd Test when he flicked a single off medium-pacer Abdul Razzaq to move to 27.

He went on to make 52 -- taking his career tally to 10,025 -- when he was caught behind by wicketkeeper Kamran Akmal off leg-spinner Shahid Afridi.

Tendulkar raised his bat and looked skywards as partner Rahul Dravid and the Pakistan players congratulated him.

Former Australian captain Allan Border tops the list with 11,174 runs in 156 Tests.

Australian Steve Waugh (10,927), India's Sunil Gavaskar (10,122) and West Indian Brian Lara (10,094) are the other batsmen in the elite club.

Tendulkar, who made his Test debut against Pakistan at Karachi in 1989, is also one short of surpassing Gavaskar's world record tally of 34 centuries.

He holds the record of most runs in one-day internationals, having scored 13,497 in 342 matches with 37 hundreds.

Reza Kibria

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contest any election at this time, given the law and order situation in the country. When the government is unable to provide security for sitting MPs, is there any reason to believe they will be capable of providing security for the candidates and the voters?"

Secondly, Reza pointed out the failure to complete the investigation into his father's killing and to arrest all the culprits. This, he said, is sending a very bad signal to the nation as a whole.

Talking to the UNB at his Dhanmondi residence yesterday, Reza said until an appropriate investigation is undertaken and real culprits are punished, it would be a very irresponsible precedence in that MPs could be killed to make their seats vacant and the beneficiaries of these killings would be allowed the opportunity to take their seats.

He said, "Some of these possible beneficiaries may be behind my father's assassination. The newspaper reports of involvement of local BNP has created a great unease in this respect."

Asked if he would join active politics, Reza, a professor of Griffith University, Australia, said being a teacher and editor, he feels that in both these capacities he could make useful contribution to this country.

About her mother Asma Kibria's joining active politics, he said, "I don't think she has such interest."

Asked if the Awami League is going to boycott the parliamentary by-election, he said, "I have no authority to speak on behalf of the Awami League."

Asked whether the FBI's involvement in the investigation has been shelved, he said: the government is obviously resisting the FBI agents' involvement, perhaps realising that the trail of guilt may turn in an uncomfortable direction.

About the ongoing investigation, he said, "No investigation that does not have the FBI participation under this government will be acceptable to our family."

To another question, he said they will gradually build up an international campaign to support their efforts in the country to bring his father's assassins to justice.

Ministry wings blame

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Responding to the blame, the State Minister for Energy and Mineral Resources AKM Mosharrar Hossain, who attended the meeting as representative of the prime minister, said it should be determined if the shortage of the gas is the main reason for the power crisis or if there are other factors involved.

"Without putting all the blame on the shortage of the gas supply, the House body should see what actually is the problem behind the power generation crisis," a meeting source quoted him as saying.

Mosharrar, however, assured the meeting that they would be able to supply adequate gas to the power plants from March 22 as about 60 to 70 million more cubic feet (mcmfd) of gas per day will be added to the national grid from the Moulavibazar gas field this month. Besides, the Haripur gas field will add 15 mcmfd in a week, the committee Chairman Shahidul Islam later told reporters.

The two state ministers' explanations could not, however, satisfy the parliamentary standing committee of the power, energy and mineral resources ministry and it decided to hold a joint meeting with both two divisions on March 28 to identify the fault behind the crisis.

"We will try to identify at the joint meeting the reasons why people are now suffering from the power crisis,"

ACC formed

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publishing the index of corruption rating. Bangladesh ranked 145 among 146 nations in TI's 2004 corruption rating.

The report also highlights the urgent need for governments to ensure transparency in public spending and for multinational companies to stop bribing at home and abroad.

In the Bangladesh chapter, the report said, "An anti-corruption commission was created in Bangladesh in 2004 to replace the discredited anti-corruption bureau. The commission has wide-ranging investigative powers, but its autonomy is limited."

"The commissioner is appointed by the president and the government controls its budget. New procurement regulations that promote transparency and accountability were introduced at the ministry of planning, but, significantly, exceptions are allowed on matters of state security, including military spending," the report added.

"Corruption in large-scale public projects is a daunting obstacle to sustainable development," said Peter Eigen, chairman of TI while launching the report.

"Corruption in procurement plagues both developed and developing countries," Eigen said adding, "The unfolding scandal surrounding the UN sponsored oil-for-food programme in Iraq highlights the interest rules and transparent and open bidding processes."

The report says the global cost of corruption is around US\$3,200 billion per year in the global construction market. It cited examples of such corruption in Argentina, Paraguay, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Uganda.

The TI observes that corruption in the construction sector not only plunders economies, it shapes them and also ravages the environment and creates social hazards.

In the Asia/Pacific chapter, the report says corruption in elections was a concern in several countries in this region. At national elections in Cambodia, Indonesia, there were reports of widespread vote buying, violence and intimidation by all contesting parties.

Independent monitoring of election in Sri Lanka uncovered a multitude of irregularities in the April 2004 ballot, including the abuse of state resources -- particularly state media -- for campaign purposes. The report also found widespread corruption in the judiciary.

About India, the report says the state parliamentary elections in November 2003 provided the first extensive test of a requirement for all candidates contesting elections to declare their educational levels, criminal records, assets and financial liabilities.

TI recommended the governments of the countries to take initiatives to prevent corruption and asked the country leaders to follow the minimal instructions, which includes a series of risk assessments, action plans and anti-corruption tools.

The White House said Berlusconi's decision was not linked to Calipari's death, but the incident has strained Italy's relations with the United States and Bush has promised an investigation.

Donors can leave

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"The election process of the country will be decided by the people, the government and the opposition. It's not a concern of the outsiders," he went on.

The minister lambasted the UNDP, saying, "It's not a major donor. If it wants to give any opinion, it can do so through our embassy in New York. But it can't become involved in the local politics in the name of helping the economy. How the election should be held or how the caretaker government should function is not any of its concerns."

Referring to the recent donors' meeting in Washington on Bangladesh, Saifur alleged the opposition instigated the donors to holding that meet, adding, "Some bilateral countries took an aggressive position there."

"But that meeting did appreciate the improvements Bangladesh has made in several development indicators. And some member countries there also told the World Bank not to get involved with the

Bangabandhu's birthday

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Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was born in 1920 in Tungipara in Gopalganj.

The main opposition Awami League, its front organisations and different socio-cultural groups have taken up various programmes to observe the day as 'National Children's Day' -- an idea introduced by the past Awami League government.

The ruling four-party government has, however, dropped it since coming to power.

The AL on the occasion will hoist the national and party flags atop its offices across the country at 6:00am.

The AL leaders and workers will pay tributes to Bangabandhu placing wreaths on his portrait at the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum in Dhanmondi in the city.

The party today holds milad mahfil, discussion meetings and cultural programmes, including a discussion at the museum in the afternoon.

An AL delegation from the city will visit Tungipara and lay wreaths on the grave of Bangabandhu there.

Awami Jubo League will organise a discussion meeting in Tungipara, while another discussion will be held at the Liberation War Museum in the city at 4:00pm today.

Leader of the Opposition and AL chief Sheikh Hasina in a message yesterday said Bangabandhu is the father of the nation and supreme leader of independence.

Hasina, Bangabandhu's daughter, called upon the people to resist any conspiracy by the anti-liberation forces. She urged them to come forward to build 'Sonar Bangla of Bangabandhu' that would be devoid of hunger, poverty, exploitation and deprivation.

She also urged the people to build up united resistance against repression and human rights violations patronised by the BNP-led alliance government.

She also accused the government of distorting the history of the Liberation War.

Shahidul said

after the meeting held at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhavan.

Members of the parliamentary standing committee also expressed concern at the impact of the power crisis on irrigation this season.

"Farmers in the northern region are facing acute problems in irrigating their crop land due to the power crisis," said committee member Shamsuzzoha Khan.

Another committee member, Habibul Islam Habib, demanded an uninterrupted power supply for irrigation.

Explaining the power crisis, Ikbāl said the Ghorasal power plant and the Ashuganj power plant cannot generate power up to their capacity due to the shortage of gas. The Ghorasal plant now generates only 370 mw, although its production capacity is 770mw. Two power plants in Ashuganj also generate at least 130mw less than their capacity.

The committee chairman, however, questioned the statistics on power generation provided by the power division at the meeting.

"The power division at a meeting on August 31, 2004 told us the total capacity of the power plants is 4,142 mw and they can generate 3,700 mw in peak hours. But on Tuesday last, it generated only 3,280 mw, about 500 mw less than the demand," he said.

PM speech draws flak

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Awami League (AL) and its left-leaning allies said they are determined to force the government through a mass movement to meet their demand about caretaker government.

In her valedictory speech during a thanksgiving motion in the House, Khaleda urged foreigners not to interfere in domestic affairs of Bangladesh and said such external interference will not be tolerated. She also said the opposition parties' demand for reforms in the caretaker system is 'irrational'.

AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil in a statement said, "As people have rejected her government, Khaleda Zia is now smelling the conspiracy of foreigners to cover her failures."

Deputy Leader of the Opposition and AL central leader Abdul Hamid said, "The remarks she (Khaleda) made in parliament are indecent. As the prime minister, she should not have spoken this way."

The PM's threat to foreign countries is unlikely to do any good to the country, Hamid said. "Representatives of foreign countries are here, and if she (PM) received any threat or pressure from any country, she should have protested it in a diplomatic way."

AL lawmaker and former home minister Mohammad Nasim said, "She (PM) has to make it public which country or foreign force is putting pressure on her government or is dictating it in running the country."

Rashed Khan Menon, president of the Workers Party of Bangladesh said,

country's political process

, as it contradicts the charter under which the bank operates," Saifur noted.

On another issue, of foreign currency reserve, the minister said the country is facing heavy pressure there because of higher imports. "But," he was hopeful that, "We'll get development support from the donors which will help us maintain the reserve."

Same as before, Saifur in that discussion bashed the media saying, "Their headlines and politically-motivated reports are destroying Bangladesh's image abroad."

He resented the fact that the donors and the press consider the deaths in 'crossfire and encounters' as human rights violation. "But, we're not doing it by framing any law," Saifur maintained, "Only killers are taken to encounters. If the killings by the killers are not human rights violation, how can any one term the death of a killer a human rights violation?"

He urged the media to come up with more 'constructive' news.

No change of heart

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three proposals of Bangladesh in exchange for the pipeline deal despite the border tension and other recent problems.

State Minister for Energy AKM Mosharrar Hossain repeatedly said Bangladesh will not sign the tri-national gas pipeline agreement unless India signs the bilateral treaty with Bangladesh.

Our New Delhi Correspondent, on the other hand, reports that India's external affairs ministry recently sent a letter to the petroleum ministry stating that bilateral issues should not be a part of the three-nation MoU proposed to be signed in Dhaka soon.

India is also reviewing whether it will be profitable to import Myanmar gas in the proposed configuration. Myanmar has indicated a price of \$4.27 per million British thermal unit (MBTU) for its offshore gas to be transported via a 290km pipeline through Bangladesh to India.

After including the transit fee to be paid to Bangladesh, the delivered price of the gas is estimated at over \$5 per MBTU, petroleum ministry sources said, adding this is 20 percent higher than the price at which India will import liquefied natural gas from Iran.

In view of this, the state-owned Gas Authority of India Limited (GAIL) is working on a detailed feasibility report for transporting the gas from Myanmar through other options, such as in the form of compressed natural gas by ships or LNG or by overland pipeline bypassing Bangladesh, said the sources.

But officials in Dhaka said New Delhi in principle agreed to Dhaka's proposal for a trade corridor facility through India to Nepal and access to hydropower from Nepal and Bhutan at the Yangon meeting last month. It also agreed to work on reducing the trade imbalance on the basis of an 'agreed framework'.

"India asked us to bring in the details of the three proposals at the upcoming meeting likely in April," said a well placed source in the

8 BNP men

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said the charge sheet in the murder case would be submitted in a week.

In their report submitted Monday evening, the investigators identified AKM Abdul Quaiyum, Habiganj district BNP vice president and president of Zia Gabeshana Parishad, as the planner of the attack.

Police arrested him on February 5 at his Segunbagicha home in the capital.

Sources said the investigators named Jainal Abedin Mumin, Lashkarpur union ward 2 BNP secretary and a leader of Zia Gabeshana Parishad (ZGP), as the prime suspect of throwing the grenade.

The probe team guessed the Arges brand grenade might have come from the borderlands in Sylhet including Jokiganj and Karimganj and the hill tracts.

The team submitted its probe report to the home secretary after about one and a half months into its formation.

The six-member team headed by Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police, Sylhet Range AKM Mahfuzul Haq also has representation of National Security Intelligence, Criminal Investigation Department, Directorate General of Forces Intelligence and Rab (Rapid Action Battalion).

The team led by the DIG submitted the report on the quiet, without the knowledge of the press, two days before the deadline.

The government remained tight-lipped about the report. Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Home Secretary Omar Farooq admitted only to have received the report. He declined to disclose even the time when he had received it.

Asked about the findings of the probe, Farooq said, "We're yet to examine the report."

But, sources said the investigators, in the about 150-page report, detailed the arrangement of the AL meeting, Kibria's participation, how the incident took place, and the role of police before and after the incident. The team then reported on the planners and executors of the grenade attack, the suspects and arrestees, the grounds for the arrests and suspicions, possible beneficiaries of the attack and its motives, possible sources of the grenade and recommendation to stop recurrence of such attacks.

THE MANHUNT

The grenade blast minutes into the end of an AL meeting at Baider Bazar Govt Primary School in Lashkarpur union killed former finance minister and local AL lawmaker Kibria, his nephew and three others and injured at least 70 people.

Habiganj district AL Organising Secretary Abdul Majid Khan filed two separate cases -- one for murder and the other under the explosives substance act.

Nine BNP adherents have been arrested so far in the murder case. They are Quaiyum, Mumin, Habiganj district ZGP general secretary Shahed Ali, Lashkarpur union BNP president Jamir Ali, Habiganj district ZGP assistant office secretary Shamim Ahmed, ZGP activist Tajul Islam, BNP activists Shah Alam and Jainal Abedin Jalal, and Quaiyum's associate Ayat Ali.

All the nine are now being interrogated on police remand.

The probe team, on completion of its investigations, accused eight BNP-men of collaborating in the attack in some way or other, sources said.

Of the accused, Mumin, Shahed, Jamir and Tajul have come up with judicial confessions to their involvement in the attack.

India, US talks

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New Delhi on April 17, a move which could add momentum to peace efforts.

"More important than the match, I would like to meet the Indian leadership," Musharraf told the BBC in an interview broadcast Tuesday. "I know that they do, there is a desire on their side also. I look forward to making this meeting a little more concrete to move the process forward."

Indo-Pakistani tensions have eased since the two sides began talks last year aimed at ending half a century of enmity.

Washington wants to begin talks on how India can meet its energy demands, including through possible US-Indian cooperation in civilian nuclear power, said a senior State Department official who asked not be named.

President Bush accuses Iran of seeking to develop nuclear weapons, bracketing it with North Korea and pre-war Iraq in a so-called axis of evil. Tehran says its nuclear program is intended only to generate electricity.

India, which has ancient ties with Iran, said it was talking with Tehran about a pipeline to meet its huge energy needs despite US concerns.

"We have no problem of any kind with Iran," Singh said. "The energy requirements of India are growing exponentially in the years to come as we become more and more industrialized."

Indian Oil Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar said India needed Iranian gas as it was a relatively cheap source of energy. Aiyar acknowledged, however, that the Iran project faced obstacles including lingering concerns over the safety of a pipeline running through nuclear rival Pakistan.

"I don't think the path is going to be smooth. The security community of India has a less rosy picture about Pakistan. Apprehensions are still there," he said at a book release function.

India for Saarc

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The current budget session of Indian parliament is expected to break for recess on March 24 and resume on April 19.

"Pakistan, as chairperson of Saarc, is required to initiate consultations with the host government (Bangladesh) and other member countries for identifying fresh dates of the summit which are mutually convenient to all," Ahmed said.

He said it was only in an environment free from political turmoil and violence that a Saarc Summit would yield the desired results.

"The decision (India will not participate in Saarc Summit in Dhaka) was taken in the background of recent developments in our neighbourhood, ..., and deterioration in security situation in Dhaka," Ahmed added.