

Rumsfeld's visit to Iraq bolsters handover strategy

REUTERS, Mosul, Iraq

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld left Iraq on Christmas Eve confident that his cautious strategy to hand over security responsibilities to Iraqi forces – a critical component for eventually declaring victory – was working so far.

The unannounced two-day visit ending on Saturday, which followed stops in Pakistan and Afghanistan, was considered a "stock-taking mission" that had been planned for months with the intention of capitalizing on Iraq's relatively peaceful December 15 parliamentary election.

In public pronouncements and private meetings, Rumsfeld showed he clearly believes that the Iraq war has entered a new phase in which the US role is shifting from occupier to supporter of Iraqi forces assuming control of their nation's security.

He was careful to avoid any prediction or timetable for a US withdrawal. Asked by a soldier how he would define victory, Rumsfeld calmly replied: "a situation where the political process is successful, where security forces are sufficiently competent to take over the security responsibilities."

The strategy in place amounts to a delicate balancing act in which US forces slowly hand over security responsibilities to Iraqi forces they are training, while at the same time increasing logistical and intelligence support.

It was the first time that Rumsfeld has stayed overnight in Iraq since the war began, visiting US troops at bases around the country under heavy military escort and staying at one of Saddam's former luxury resorts near Baghdad. Extra security, including decoys, was provided for his last stop in Mosul for a Christmas Eve meal with the troops in one of Iraq's most volatile cities.

Rumsfeld played host, serving lobster tails and steak to troops who waited in line, and posing for photographs. In a speech later, he thanked them for their service, his voice choking up at times.

The trip was highlighted by Rumsfeld's announcement a day after he arrived in Iraq that the U.S. would not deploy 7,000 combat troops from two brigades – one currently in Kuwait and the other in the United States – that would scale down troop numbers from around 138,000 over the past year to around 130,000.

"The size and composition of US forces will fluctuate as commanders continue to shift focus to emphasize supporting and training the Iraqi security forces," he told US troops in Falluja, where he made the announcement.

Officials travelling with him insisted on calling the strategy a "cautiously optimistic adjustment" that marked the start of the next phase of Iraq's transition to self-rule. Some officials believe if progress continues on the security, political and economic front, US forces could be below 100,000 within the next six months.

NOT A CONVENTIONAL WAR
The US commander in Iraq, Gen. George Casey, said he would likely make further adjustments after a spring evaluation that would consider whether Iraq's new military can handle further responsibilities.

"This is not a conventional war," he said. "In this type of war we're fighting, more is not necessarily better and in fact

70 shops

FROM PAGE 16
out gutting 70 shops and eight houses, sources said.

As there is no fire station at Patharghata, firefighters called in from Barguna, Mathbaria and Bhandaria managed to get the fire under control at 4:30am.

Electricity supply and telecommunication were disrupted in Patharghata due to the fire.

Asian highway

FROM PAGE 1
accepted, Communications Minister Nazmul Huda categorically said.

Earlier, a cabinet meeting also took the position against joining the giant road network.

The four-party alliance government will not join the network during this term as it thinks the highway with the existing route will turn to be a transit to India, highly placed sources in the government said.

Not giving transit to India was one of the major commitments to the voters during the campaign of the last election that brought the alliance to power and joining the highway and giving transit to India may have a negative effect in the upcoming general elections, said a cabinet minister requesting anonymity.

Several experts, however, are of the view that joining the highway does not mean giving transit to any country.

Foreign investors will hesitate to invest in Bangladesh if it does not have road connections with the neighbours, they said.

According to the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (Escap).

Convention on the highway, transport of goods and people will require separate agreements after establishing the network.

If a country has reservations about allowing goods of any particular country through its territory, it has every right not to sign agreement on transport of goods with that country, said former Escap director Dr Rahmatullah.

He earlier told The Daily Star that the government should join the network first and then submit the proposal for bringing amendment to the road map. Otherwise, the country

in Iraq less coalition at this point in time is better because it doesn't leave the notion of dependency," he said in an interview with reporters.

He cited Iraqi soldiers, backed by US troops, deployed near the border with Syria to disrupt a supply network for insurgents, saying they had managed to reduce the trafficking significantly.

Sounding more like a diplomat than a defence secretary, Rumsfeld emphasised the need for an all-inclusive government that would govern from the centre and would appoint competent people to run the ministries of defence, interior, finance, and planning.

Despite elections, Iraq remains wracked by violence and is threatened by political instability rooted in deep divisions among its main religious and ethnic groups.

At every chance, Rumsfeld emphasised that the new government should recognise it needs the support of the international community, including the United Nations, International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

"I would suggest that the kinds of things other nations would be looking for would be that the new government govern from the centre and be inclusive; that given the security situation in this country the new government and new ministers be people who are competent of governing in a difficult environment; and that there be a clear opposition to corruption," he added.

Thousands
FROM PAGE 16
Tk 10 a day and said they will return us Tk 10,000 after two years." Baby, a beggar from Moghbazar Wireless Railway Gate area, told The Daily Star during the demonstration yesterday.

Mother of three girls and a boy, Baby said the association's field workers promised a bright future for her children and to take care of them after her death.

Most of the victims started depositing money with the association about three years ago. Though they completed the two-year term about a year ago, the association leaders have not given them the promised returns.

"When we pressed for our money, they started dilly-dallying and gave us one date after another. When we would go to them on the next date, they used to repeat the same excuse of having fund constraints from losses incurred in some projects," said Nasima Begum from Baniyanagar in Sutrapur, whose day-labourer son runs her family.

Finally on December 15, the aggrieved members laid a siege to the association office to realise their money.

"That day four officials present at the office told us to return with our papers to the office today to receive the money," MA Aziz, a small-business man from Wari, told The Daily Star.

The officials said the same thing to the police and members of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), who arrived at the scene.

But, when the depositors came to the office yesterday morning, they found it locked and a notice on the wall saying their money would be returned next month.

The frustrated people demonstrated in the area and brought out a protest procession. A group of them later went to Muktangan parading the city roads and held a rally, from where they asked the law enforcement agencies to help them realise their money.

The victims also announced to form a human chain at Muktangan on January 1 to press their demand home.

As of 9:00 last night the Demra police could not arrest anyone in this connection and no-one filed any case.

would lose the right to vote in the future Escap working group meetings, he added.

President of apex chamber body Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) Mir Nasir Hossain said the government should rethink about joining the Asian Highway, as negative decision in this regard will deprive the country of huge economic benefit from the giant road network.

"The transportation of goods by road is much cheaper than by ship and such a road network would increase the connectivity and movement of our export and import goods," he observed.

But the route through Myanmar would be much better for Bangladesh than the other route, he added.

The government should rethink the matter carefully so that the situation does not repeat like the cases of submarine cables network or Binmest where Bangladesh signed the agreement much later, outgoing president of Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) Kutubuddin Ahmed said.

He also spoke in favour of signing the agreement first so the government can try to bring necessary amendments to the road map.

The MCCI president, however, said the route through Myanmar would be beneficial for the country, as it would connect China by road, making Chinese goods available at much cheaper price.

Cabinet may okay 3rd round bidding today

UNB, Dhaka

The cabinet is likely to endorse a policy at its regular meeting today on the third round bidding for the offshore gas exploration.

Petrobrangla, the state-run oil, gas and minerals corporation, has drafted the policy, which will be placed at the cabinet meet today.

Once approved, the energy ministry will initiate a survey to determine the hydrocarbon potentials.

Official sources said the ministry will seek expression of interests (EOIs) from international expert firms to conduct seismic survey in the 1,06 lakh square kilometre area in the Bay of Bengal.

The main objective of the planned survey will be to have a concrete picture of the hydrocarbon potentials in the country's deep sea up to 200 nautical miles into the Bay, they added.

On completion of the survey, the energy ministry will invite international oil companies (IOCs) to take part in the bidding in the second quarter of the next year.

The sources said the government in the meantime will try to remove the High Court stay on signing any production-sharing contracts (PSCs) for awarding any block to IOCs. A High Court bench issued the stay order in 2001.

They said the recent success in substantial gas discovery in offshore gas fields of some neighbouring South Asian countries like India and Myanmar has prompted the government to move for the third round bidding.

Earlier, soon after taking charge, energy ministry adviser Mahmudur Rahman had disclosed the government plan to invite the third round bidding by mid-2006.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, in charge of the energy ministry, approved the draft policy last month.

Man takes

FROM PAGE 16
exchanged heated words with his grandmother over complaints about him from the locals. An angry Gulzar killed her with a machete.

Sources said the inhabitant of the village have been complaining about Gulzar's unlawful activities including toll collection and agitating locals to his family for a long time.

He committed suicide yesterday by diving below a speeding bus on Dhaka-Monohardi highway around 8:00am.

Both the bodies are now in Narsingdi Sadar Hospital morgue.

Xmas celebrated

FROM PAGE 1
The Christians also set a glittering star on every house-top, symbolising the mythical star that had guided three wise magi from the east to the infant Jesus in Bethlehem.

The Christians believe Jesus, Son of God, took birth as a man and sacrificed his life for the salvation of the mankind.

The churches held several sessions of special Christmas prayers on December 24 night and yesterday morning. Christmas carols, hymns, and other musical and entertainment shows were also staged before and after the prayer sessions.

The Christians arranged feasts at hotels and homes with Christmas cakes dominating the courses to share the happiness with relatives, friends and neighbours.

President Iajuddin Ahmed, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Opposition Leader Sheikh Hasina greeted the Christians and wished them well on the occasion.

The president and his wife hosted a reception at Bangabhaban attended by Archbishop Michael Rozario, the clergy of different churches, ambassadors and diplomats from foreign missions, and leading community members.

Dialogue

FROM PAGE 1
But the schedules for holding talks with other political parties and groups are yet to be fixed, officials at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said.

The last meeting was held on December 19 with NGOs and the Ulemas (Islamic scholars).

The dialogue that began on December 12 amid boycott by the opposition alliance and pro-opposition professional groups has got a low space in the prime minister's timetable as she was occupied with other business.

Out of 27 political parties and 15 professional bodies invited to the talks, Khaleda Zia has had talks with seven organisations so far.

The officials at the PMO dispatched invitation letters to some 43 organisations on December 6 and 7. The Awami League (AL) led 14-party opposition alliance and pro-opposition professional bodies had rejected outright the invitations.

Khaleda met Krishak Sramik Janata League and Bangladesh Medical Association on December 12, HM Ershad-led Jatiya Party and Council for National Agenda on December 13, Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (FBUJ) and Dhaka Union of Journalists on December 14 and Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh and the Ulemas on December 19.

Gas sector

FROM PAGE 1
However, the government earlier this month appointed Mosharrar Hossain Bhuiyan, who was serving as joint secretary of the education ministry, Petrobrangla chairman.

SR Osmani was previously leading one of the government's negotiating teams with Tata.

He was also one of the two members of the technical committee to negotiate the tri-nation gas pipeline proposal.

Incidentally, the government in recent months also terminated the contract of the other technical member of this committee, Salek Sufi of Gas Transmission Company Ltd.

"Because of frequent changes and overwhelming responsibilities, a stagnation prevails in the affairs of Titas, RPGCL and Bapex," said an official of Petrobrangla.

By his designation since 1990-91, the energy secretary heads three boards of Petrobrangla affiliates -- the boards of Titas Gas, Ruptanarita Prakritik Gas Company Ltd and Bapex.

Accordingly, they get multiple cars from these companies, which are supposed to be headed by Petrobrangla.

"Such additional responsibilities of the secretaries had always created administrative weaknesses and conflicts," says a high official of one of the Petrobrangla affiliates, asking not to be named.

For instance, an official of Titas could enjoy immunity from any punishment if they maintain a good relationship with the ministry, instead of Petrobrangla.

The administrative weaknesses intensified since the prime minister took over the charge of the energy ministry in 1998 during the Awami League regime and started worsening after the BNP came to power.

As the prime minister cannot give due attention to the gas sector bodies, state ministers are generally given the responsibilities.

The state ministers of the two consecutive governments have not demonstrated any leadership and were found to be interfering with decisions that should have been taken by Petrobrangla or its affiliates.

For instance, when The Daily Star ran specific reports on the corruption of a millionaire meter reader of Titas Gas company, or massive bungling in Titas Gas company's pipeline project, the state ministers had protected the culprits pinpointed by the reports.

As the national coordination body, Petrobrangla used to work independently in most cases until

1996-97. From then on, it became very weak with the state ministers or presently with the adviser taking or imposing decisions," said another high official.

The Bapex was forced to accept the faulty joint venture agreement between Bapex and Niko, although its parent body Petrobrangla resisted it.

Again, to cripple Petrobrangla by taking most of its powers directly to the energy ministry, ousted state minister AKM Mosharrar Hossain in 2003 wanted to make the ministry's hydrocarbon unit a parallel to Petrobrangla.

Created in 1998 as a donor-funded one-year project as a technical arm of the energy ministry, the small Hydrocarbon Unit was intended to be given power like Production Sharing Contract (PSC) negotiations and approval of PSCs. Although it did not happen, the pressure to weaken Petrobrangla continues still today.

Consequently, the government did not arrange new recruitments in Petrobrangla since 1999, leading to a shortfall of about 65 per cent of its manpower.

Sources said the government under donors' pressure appointed managing directors and general managers for finances and operations from private sector for Titas, RPGCL and the Gas Transmission Company Ltd (GTCL) on contract with high salaries as part of turning them into functionally autonomous companies.

However, when the appointments of the general managers were made, they were designated as directors at the intervention of ousted state minister AKM Mosharrar Hossain.

This created severe conflicts with the regular general managers in the three organisations who refused to accept their 'designated' seniority. Consequently, the regular general managers feel demoralised, the sources said.

At the same time, the purpose of appointing managers on contract is not being served. While their performances should be evaluated regularly, they are not evaluated.

"In fact nobody maintains any Annual Confidential Report (ACR) on them, while regular managers get promoted on the basis of their ACRs," quips a source.

Dhaka trying

FROM PAGE 1
Although George W Bush along with First Lady Laura Bush will mainly visit India in February or early March next year, diplomatic sources said Bush might also visit Bangladesh and Pakistan aiming at consolidating an enhanced dialogue with the South Asian leaders.

The PMO source said higher authorities of the foreign ministry and Washington mission are in close contact with the senior officials of the US State Department and there is a positive indication from the US side.

Bangladesh Ambassador in Washington Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury also met Bush in White House recently.

"We are hopeful that President Bush will come to Dhaka as Bangladesh is a valued partner of the United States in the war on terror and the United States engages the Bangladesh government on a range of important issues," the source added.

Asked about the possibility of President Bush's visit to Dhaka, a high official of the foreign ministry said, "Nothing is unlikely. We have received indication from the US officials that President Bush may visit Bangladesh."

Requesting anonymity, he said

the US administration has made a fundamental judgment that the future of South Asia as a whole is vital to the future of the United States and that Bangladesh is vital for US strategy in the region.

The foreign ministry official said the US now has very active and productive relationships with every country in South Asia and both Bangladesh and the US presently enjoy excellent relationship.

"We already have strong relationship and both the countries have made clear intention to moving to the next level," he added.

Former US president Bill Clinton visited Bangladesh in February 2000 as part of his South Asia tour.

Bangladeshi

FROM PAGE 1
Rafiqul Alam Ripon was held from the Shalgaria area in Pabna, and three jihadi books and three CDs from his house were seized, a Rab press release said yesterday.

The art of bomb manufacturing and explosions, and heroism of Kashmir warriors were detailed in the CDs.

Son of Lutfar Rahman, Ripon is a student of the Management department at Edward College and a well-known Shibir worker in his locality, locals said.

Meanwhile, the banned Islamist outfit Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) Friday threatened to blow up the Music and Dramatic Department of Rajshahi University, reports our RU correspondent.

"We will blow up the department as well as teachers and students who are not maintaining Islamic laws," a hand-written letter, addressed to the department chairman Prof Matin Talukder, warned.

Found at his office, the letter asked the chairman to refrain from admission test in future, terming art and culture anti-Islamic.

Panic gripped students of the department soon after the letter was found, prompting the RU authorities to deploy a large contingent of police in front of the department.

CTG JMB CHIEF REMANDED AGAIN
Four JMB operatives including its Chittagong divisional chief Mohammad (Aman Ullah) remanded again yesterday, this time for 10 days, our staff correspondent from Chittagong adds.

On completion of a 10-day remand in Dhaka, Aman along with other JMB men-- Naimuzzaman (Zafar/Sohag), Rafiqul Islam (Javed/Roman) and Manirul Islam-- was produced before the Court of Metropolitan Magistrate in Chittagong with a fresh remand prayer in a case for possessing explosives.

The JMB operatives were then taken to Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), Chittagong headquarters at Patenga for interrogation, sources said.

Violence

FROM PAGE 1
shot Aftab at point blank range when he was waiting for a rickshaw around 20 yards off his house at Mirpur Block-E at about 10:45am.

"Two motorcyclists stopped their bike behind Aftab and shot twice in his head and left arm minutes after he came out of his house with a youth," said a butcher, Mahbub.

Aftab's family members said the youth who was accompanying Aftab had come to his house at about 9:00am and had breakfast with him. They however could not identify the youth.

Mahbub said the motorcyclists in their 20s fled the scene firing a blank shot and leaving Aftab in a pool of blood. None dared to chase the criminals.

Locals and family members rushed Aftab to DMCH where doctors operated on his wounds. "He is now out of danger," said a hospital source in the afternoon.

As a rumour spread that Aftab has been killed a few hundred Mirpur residents burst into protests. The shopkeepers took to the street putting the shutters down.

The protesters turned violent and damaged at least 12 vehicles passing Mirpur Section-1 roundabout. They also pelted stones at some wayside shops.

Police rushed to the scene and clubbed the demonstrators prompting them to pelt bricks on the law enforcers. The clash between the locals and the police continued for half an hour.

Additional police force and Rapid Action Battalion then rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control.

Officer-in-Charge of Mirpur Police Station last night said they could neither arrest anyone, nor have any clue to the incident.

Local businessmen said criminals killed four businessmen and injured 15 others in Mirpur over extortion in the last two years.

Defence policy

FROM PAGE 16
information, home affairs, law, justice and parliamentary affairs, sources said.

The AFD in its report said the council is considering different aspects including the constitution, foreign policy, international war policies, threat analysis, existing structure and the capacities of the armed forces.

The council after preparing the draft policy will submit it to the cabinet for approval. The cabinet will decide the fate of the draft.

"We will discuss the progress in preparing the defence policy at today's meeting," Lt Gen (ret'd) Mahbubur Rahman, chairman of the parliamentary committee on defence ministry, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said the process to formulate a defence policy has begun long after the country's independence. "We hope the process will be completed soon."

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Awami League lawmaker and committee member ASHK Sadeque said the defence policy should be prepared immediately so that the armed forces can go ahead with the policy.

Shibir man

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No sign to end crisis

FROM PAGE 1
Fertiliser Association (BFA) went on an indefinite strike stopping fertiliser supply from December 19 in protest against the non-release of long overdue subsidy fund of Tk 60 crore, Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman told newsmen that his ministry would release the fund if the bills were found genuine.

Finance Secretary Siddiqur Rahman Chowdhury recently told The Daily Star that release of the long overdue subsidy bills was under his ministry's consideration but declined to explain why the release was delayed.

As 3,000 fertiliser dealers across the country are running the risk of fast depleting stocks, the agriculture ministry and BFA found finance's excuse of looking into the genuineness of the subsidy bills as "very disturbing" since further delay in subsidy fund release would prolong the strike resulting in the reduction in boro, potato and other winter crops production.

Stocks of non-urea chemical fertiliser -- triple super phosphate (TSP), murate of potash (MoP) and di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) -- at dealer-level are fast depleting.

"Dealers will run dry within five days as their stocks are not being replenished due to the strike. Unless government gives us the overdue subsidy fund immediately, we'll be forced to release fresh stocks of fertiliser at market prices (without providing 25 percent rebate)," BFA Chairman Kofluddin Ahmed told The Daily Star yesterday.

Against the backdrop of the strike at a time when the farmers apply 80 percent of their yearly fertiliser requirement to their boro, potato and other winter crops, BFA and the agriculture ministry last week sat in a meeting that ended inconclusively while the latter blamed the finance ministry for not releasing the long overdue subsidies.

Criminals

FROM PAGE 16
Meherpur, but no one was reported injured.

The incident took place when a Rab team raided the den of a local gang leader, known as "Haus" and accused in at least 30 cases including five for murders and 20 for abductions, at Ghorpara under Ganjani upazila at about 6:30pm.

Sensing the presence of the crime-busters, Haus, who is believed to have been staying in the den along with around 10 accomplices, opened fire on the Rab team.

As the Rab members returned shots, the gang hurled four bombs at the Rab men. Two of the bombs exploded--one in front of the Rab vehicle and another on the roof of the vehicle, Rab sources said. The second bomb tore apart the roof of the Rab vehicle.

The criminals fled the scene while the Rab retreated in the face of bomb attacks.

Later, a joint team of police, Cobra and Rab started a combing operation to hunt down