

Pakistanis protest missile attack

AP, Peshawar, Pakistan

Chanting "Death to America," Islamic groups held nationwide protests Sunday as anger mounted over a purported CIA airstrike that Pakistan says killed innocent civilians instead of the apparent target - al-Qaeda's No. 2 leader.

Meanwhile, a newspaper reported that the mission was launched on intelligence that Ayman al-Zawahri had been invited to dinner that night in one of three houses leveled by the attack on Damadola, a village near the Afghan border.

Islamabad -- which insists it does not allow the 20,000 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan to cross the border in the hunt for Taliban or al-Qaeda fighters -- has condemned the strike. The Pakistanis have shown increasing frustration over a recent series of suspected U.S. attacks along the frontier aimed at Islamic militants.

Pakistani officials say innocent people were among the 17 men, women and children killed in Friday's attack and al-Zawahri, Osama bin Laden's top lieutenant, was not even there.

Survivors in Damadola, an ethnic Pashtun hamlet about four miles from the border with Afghanistan, also denied militants were there, but some news reports quoted unidentified Pakistani officials as saying up to 11 extremists were believed among the dead.

A senior intelligence official said Sunday that 12 bodies had been taken away, including seven foreigners.

He said the bodies were reclaimed by other militants, but another Pakistani official told The Associated Press on Saturday that some were taken away for DNA tests. A law enforcement official in Washington said the FBI expected to conduct the tests to determine victims' identities, although Pakistan had not yet formally requested them.

The claims by the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter, could not be independently verified.

Counterterrorism officials in Washington declined to comment on US media reports that a CIA-operated drone aircraft fired missiles Friday at a residential compound in Damadola trying to hit al-Zawahri, whose videos have made him the face and voice of al-Qaeda.

A large number of al-Qaeda and Taliban combatants, including al-Zawahri and bin Laden, are believed to have sought refuge along the rugged, porous and ill-defined border.

Some 10,000 people rallied in Karachi, Pakistan's biggest city, chanting "Death to America" and "Stop bombing against innocent people." Hundreds of police carrying batons and shields were deployed, but the rally ended after an hour with no violence reported.

Hundreds more rallied in the capital, Islamabad, and in Lahore, Multan, Peshawar and elsewhere, burning American flags and demanding the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

In Pakistan's strongest reaction, Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed on Saturday called the attack "highly condemnable" and said the government wanted "to assure the people we will not allow such incidents to reoccur."

The Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying it protested to US Ambassador Ryan Crocker over the "loss of innocent civilian lives."

Neither addressed the target of the airstrike. But two senior Pakistani security officials confirmed to AP that al-Zawahri was the intended victim and said Pakistan's assessment was that the CIA acted on incorrect information.

On Sunday, Pakistan's Dawn newspaper, citing unidentified senior officials, reported that two clerics, Maulvi Faqir Mohammad and Maulvi Liqat, both wanted for harboring militants, also were invited to the dinner with al-Zawahri.

A senior army official said Sunday that "foreigners" were reported in the area, but there was no information al-Zawahri was among them.

Al-Zawahri may have come to meet with his wife who is from the Mahmood tribe, which is predominant in the area around Damadola, for last week's Islamic holiday of Eid al-Adha, according to one Pakistani intelligence official.

In a speech broadcast Sunday on state-run Pakistan Television, President Gen. Pervez Musharraf did not address the strike directly but warned his countrymen not to harbor militants, saying it would only increase violence within Pakistan's borders.

"If we keep sheltering foreign terrorists here ... our future will not be good. Remember what I say," Musharraf said in the speech, made Saturday in the northwestern town of Sialkot.

Many in this nation of 150 million people object to Musharraf's alliance with Washington in the war on international terror groups, seeing it as a veiled campaign against Muslims.

Ghafur Ahmed, a leader in the coalition of anti-US Islamic groups that organized nationwide rallies Sunday, called for Musharraf's resignation. "The army cannot defend the country under in his leadership," he said.

Criminals kill 1 in Uttara

UNB, Dhaka

On Saturday, more than 8,000 tribesmen chanting "God is great!" took to the streets of a town near Damadola to castigate the attack. Elsewhere in the area, a mob burned the office of a U.S.-supported aid group near Damadola.

In Damadola, villagers said all the dead were local people and denied harboring al-Zawahri or any other Islamic extremists.

The strike left three homes hundreds of yards apart in ruins. People in the area said the blasts could be felt miles away.

Doctors told AP at least 17 people died, including women and children, but residents put the death toll at more than 30.

Bin Laden and al-Zawahri, both of whom have \$25 million U.S. bounties on their heads, are believed to have been hiding along the rugged Pakistan-Afghan frontier since the U.S.-led ouster of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan after the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

Bomb hits

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He

said an unspecified number of Canadian troops were also hurt.

U.S. military spokesman Lt. Col. Jerry O'Hara said three soldiers were wounded in a bomb attack on a U.S.-led coalition convoy, but declined to identify their nationalities.

Calls to a spokesman for the Canadian force in Kandahar went unanswered. Canada has about 650 troops in Afghanistan, nearly all in Kandahar.

Shopkeeper Rahim Gul said he saw a sedan vehicle blow up as it was passing the convoy.

"The explosion was so big. It destroyed one jeep and blew it totally to the other side of the road," he said, adding that he saw at least three wounded soldiers.

The blast is the latest in a string of suicide attacks that represent a new and disturbing security threat in Afghanistan.

Violence across southern and eastern Afghanistan spiked last year, leaving about 1,600 people dead, the most since U.S.-led forces ousted the Taliban in 2001 for hosting Osama bin Laden.

The fighting normally eases during the winter months, when snow blankets the region, but the past few weeks have seen a string of suicide attacks and other assaults.

3 Bangladeshis

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Told The Daily Star, adding that 21 bodies of the stampede victims could not be identified. The tragic accident happened during the stone-throwing ritual at Mina last Thursday.

Environment and Forest Minister Tariqul Islam, Social Welfare Minister Ali Ahsan Mujahid and State Minister for Religious Affairs Mosharaf Hossain Shahjahan are supervising the identification process of the Bangladeshi Hajis in Makkah.

US State

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government on a range of important issues including democracy, human rights, fighting corruption and counterterrorism.

The source said the forthcoming general elections, and US cooperation in enhancing Bangladesh's capability to fight extremism will be the major points of discussions.

The US State Department is expected to finalise the name of its official in a couple of days, the source added.

Nicholas Burns changed his travel plan excluding Bangladesh from his tour of South Asia which starts on January 17. He will visit India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Fog hampers

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Meanwhile, as more passengers switched from buses to launches in order to avoid the log jam at ferry terminals, south-bound launches were experiencing seven-to-eight-hour delays at Sadarghat.

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A hospital in sickbed

FROM PAGE 1

Suhrawardy Hospital is housed in a beautifully designed three-storey building, which, according to a number of senior doctors, is the country's best and has the latest medical gadgets and facilities of a general hospital.

In fact, when it was first planned back in 1963, it was meant to be the only full-fledged general hospital in the erstwhile East Pakistan. The present authorities, too, believe that the hospital has a great potential for providing tertiary level health care, particularly to the residents of the northern part of the country.

Instead, the hospital has become a place of rampant cheating of credulous patients, pilferage and tender manipulation, and its immense premises a safe haven for crooks and criminals including commission agents of dishonest private clinics, drug-dealers, muggers, thieves, extortionists and even killers.

The situation really beggars belief.

A gang, which once controlled the criminal activities including drug peddling, arms trading, extortion, blackmailing and mugging at the now-evicted BNP Shimla in nearby Agaraon, now uses the hospital as its base. Thieves carry out rampant pilferage of hospital's fixtures, furniture and equipment as well as valuables of patients at night. So, every one from patients to staff feels unsafe after dusk, said a security guard.

A professor of surgery at the hospital on condition of anonymity said a nexus of some young doctors and staffs at the emergency and outdoor departments and brokers of various dishonest private clinics regularly cheats the admission seekers to the hospital.

The professor also confirmed that on average 60 percent of the paying and 40 percent of the non-paying beds at the hospital remain empty, when in other government hospitals in Dhaka two to three patients are always lined up for every bed.

During a visit, The Daily Star found four out of seven beds in a non-paying room and one out of three in a paying room under the female surgery ward empty. A

nurse on duty said 15 patients were there that day in the 30-bed ward comprising 21 paying and nine non-paying beds. But, in every other general hospital in the city, this is a ward where seats are always most scarce.

The Daily Star team also saw a lone sexagenarian patient lying despondently in a 10-bed room under the male ophthalmology ward. Lokaotullah, a peasant from Sonaimudi in Noakhali, said he went to consult Dr Lutfar Rahman, head of the ophthalmology department, at his private chamber and the doctor got him admitted to the hospital. The rustic man felt dejected living in the near deserted ward and was looking forward to the minor eye surgery he was scheduled to undergo to have done with the desolation.

MEDICAL COLLEGE: AWAY OUT

A move has been on for long to turn Suhrawardy Hospital into a medical college, especially considering that the seven specialised hospitals or medical institutes in the area would provide it with a rich spectrum of faculty.

According to Prof Zamal Nizamuddin Ahmed of the NIOH, "Suhrawardy Hospital should be turned into a medical university. It has the infrastructure required for that. A proposal was made during the Awami League regime to turn it into Begum Fazilatunnesa Medical College. But, nothing has come of that still."

Dr Ahmed said, overcoming political aversion, "The government should take a decision immediately. The campus is most suitable for such an institute."

One of the guards said, at night, sometimes he has to abandon his usual post in fear of the prowling criminals and to remain hidden behind the building. At the evening, the guards on duty shut almost all the gates and windows of the hospital, turning it into a virtual fort under siege.

The area then comes under control of the gang of 20 to 25 criminals named after its leader Kajol, a notorious local kingpin who allegedly killed Chapati Babu, the leader of his rival group, in 2004 and established supremacy in the entire area housing some seven hospitals, sources said.

According to them, Kajol Group maintains close ties with and receives protection from local political quarters and law enforcers. They said also grabs all the contacted work of the hospital allegedly in collaboration with some influential members of the admission seekers to the hospital.

Still, an administration official of the hospital said with hope, "When it becomes a college, a lot of people like students, new staffs, teachers will be here. The insecurity will then surely dissipate and order restored."

Cold claims 15 more

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College and Hospital yesterday, writes our staff correspondent in Rajshahi.

Sixty-year-old Sobrah of Dogachhi village in Pabna was admitted to the RMCH in December last year as he was suffering from asthma, hospital sources said.

He was jailed for five years in a drug possession case, jail authorities said. They added that necessary measures have been taken to save prisoners from the biting cold.

All the doors and windows of the prison were covered with thick sacks and every inmate has more than one blanket.

GAIBANDHA

Severe cold snap killed four women in the district in the last 24 hours as the ongoing cold wave continued to intensify, reports our Gaibandha correspondent.

The victims are Monwara Begum, 65, of Gabgabchi village in Fulchhari upazila, Jhumri Begum, 46, of Santola village, Laxmi Rani, 52, of Keshalidanga village and Fajitannessa, 55, of Gangar Narayanganj village in Sadullapur upazila.

Meantime, communications between Balashi and Bahadurabad ferry ghats have almost been snapped due to heavy fog. The trouble intensified as the marine department of the railway has closed down its ferry services.

A similar situation prevails in road communications as the entire district was covered with heavy fog until yesterday noon.

The shivering cold weather also kept many, especially women and children, indoors.

Shutters of many shops in the city centre and commercial areas were down as shopkeepers and employees are yet to return from

Lower court

FROM PAGE 1

Jhalakathi on November 14.

"Although the government has beefed up the security at the court premises, gave personal gunner to the district judges, compensated the families and gave jobs to the wives of the slain judges, it is yet to fulfil all of the demands," said BJSA President Rafiqul Islam, who is also the Dhaka District and Sessions Judge.

The government only provided gunner to the judges of Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunals and is yet to provide vehicles, he said.

"We also asked the government to allocate residences of all district judges on one compound and provide round the clock guards, which is yet to be fulfilled," he added.

On the 55th conference, BJSA also pressed three-point demand to the prime minister apart from their 11-point demand, which the BJSA officials claimed are yet to be fulfilled.

These include -- appointing assistant judges for the vacant posts, giving the district and sessions judges the status of joint secretary and appointing 50 percent of the High Court judges from the lower courts.

The BJSA would sit in its extended meeting on January 29 to decide their next plan of actions, officials said.

Two mothers

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The boy died on the spot while his mother succumbed to her wounds at the Osmani Medical College Hospital (OMCH) after an hour.

Three others were critically injured in the accident and were admitted to hospital.

The driver of the killer truck managed to escape. The Osmangir police seized the truck.

In another incident, Shaheda Begum, 30, and her husband Abdul Aziz along with their eight-year-old son Hamza were travelling by an autorickshaw towards Ranapara when a Sylhet-bound minibus hit the three wheeler at Choughari of Golapganj upazila on the Sylhet-Jalikiganj Highway at around 12:30pm.

The mother and son were declared dead by OMCH doctors.

Shaheda's husband sustained critical wounds and was admitted to hospital.

PM

FROM PAGE 1

now in Dhaka on leave, is also accompanying the prime minister.

A large number of heads of state and government from all over the world will also be going to offer their deep condolences at the demise of Emir of Kuwait.

US-led forces used Kuwait as its main staging ground for the 2003 invasion of Iraq that toppled Saddam. Kuwait hosts up to 30,000 US troops and is home to some 13,000 oilfield workers.

The emir was the 13th ruler of a dynasty that has ruled Kuwait for more than two centuries. The Anaya tribe, to which the al-Sabahs belong, migrated from the Arabian hinterland.