

38 Taliban, Nato soldier killed in Afghan battle

AFP, Kabul

US and Afghan troops backed by warplanes killed more than 35 Taliban militants during a five-hour battle in a bitterly contested area of southern Afghanistan, the US-led coalition said yesterday.

Meanwhile, a Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) soldier was killed in a separate gunbattle with rebels on Friday, becoming the 12th foreign soldier to die in Afghanistan in a week.

US special forces and Afghan troops also killed three Taliban who pinned down a group of civilian contractors after their helicopter came down in another area.

The fighting on Thursday in which most of the rebels were killed took place in the Sangin district of Helmand province, which around 1,000 Afghan and international troops wrested from insurgent control at the weekend.

"More than 35 Taliban fighters were killed by ANA (Afghan National Army) and coalition forces during the five-hour afternoon battle," the coalition said in a statement.

The statement said the clashes erupted after the troops identified several militant groups in the region. US air support was also called to pursue the fighters as they fled, the statement said.

Sangin is one of several districts in southern Afghanistan that have been out of government control at times during the last year amid a fierce insurgency led by the Islamist Taliban.

The Nato soldier, whose name and nationality were not revealed, was killed in a firefights with rebels in an unnamed part of southern Afghanistan on Friday, Isaf said in another statement. Two other Nato troops were injured.

The death brought to 40 the number of international troops killed in Afghanistan this year.

Some 170 were killed there in 2006.

It came a day after two Nato soldiers were killed in separate explosions in southern Afghanistan, and follows Canada's heaviest single-day troop loss in 50 years with the deaths of six soldiers near Kandahar on Sunday.

Separately on Thursday five civilian contractors had to be rescued after their helicopter made a forced landing in southeastern Ghazni province late Thursday.

The Taliban earlier said it had "hit" a Nato helicopter there.

Militants started firing at the passengers, who evaded them "until coalition close air support arrived and engaged the pursuing enemy fighters. Three extremists were killed in the engagement," a coalition statement said.

"With the recent kidnappings by extremists, these brave soldiers and policemen, who rescued the civilians, likely prevented another cowardly hostage taking," coalition spokesman Major Christopher Belcher said.

Two French aid workers were apparently kidnapped by the Taliban in southwestern Nimroz province on April 3.

French President Jacques Chirac called his Afghan counterpart Hamid Karzai late Thursday to "demand his support" for efforts to free them, according to Karzai's office.

"The president in response assured that all relevant Afghan authorities will do their utmost to secure their release," it said.

The Taliban beheaded an Afghan journalist kidnapped with an Italian reporter a month ago. The Italian journalist was freed after two weeks in captivity under a deal which saw five Taliban free from Afghan jails.

Around 1,000 people, most of them militants, have died in insurgency-related violence this year.

Onus on the Tigers

FROM PAGE 1 also shatter the team's new target of finishing sixth.

The four-wicket defeat against England in the previous game all but ruined the Tigers' hope of clinching a semifinal berth but this match, which starts at 7:30pm with state-run Bangladesh Television (BTV) and SET Max beaming live coverage from the Kensington Oval in Bridgetown, gives them an opportunity to lift their reputation as 'the team of the competition'.

It will be the Tigers' maiden one-day international against Ireland, who made an unlikely second round entry after eliminating former world champions Pakistan but have yet to make an impression in the Super Eights. The only time the two sides had met previously was in the ICC Champions Trophy in Malaysia in 1997. The match was abandoned due to rain and interestingly, after ten years, only two players have survived from each side: Mohammad Rafique and Peter Gillespie.

The recent form and record against the associate member countries, however, speak fully in favour of Bangladesh who have already won the hearts of their critics by pulling off great victories against India and South Africa.

In the recent past, Dav Whatmore's charges have won all the matches against Kenya, Scotland, Bermuda and Canada quite convincingly to draw a line and another consistent performance from the Tigers will bring them their second win in the second phase of

competition in the World Cup.

However, there lies a different kind of challenge for Bashar and co as they face the wounded West Indians, who have already crashed out of the semifinal race, in their last match on April 19, at the same venue.

It would not be exaggerating if said, so far, what the youthful Bangladesh side have achieved in the competition has been beyond their expectation.

But the reality is that the inconsistent top-order batting still remains a concern despite remarkable success courtesy of brilliant efforts by the bowlers, particularly by the left-arm spin trio. The long-term headache over the opening partnership has also returned after Shahriar Nafees's sudden run drought.

That's why they would definitely want to see improvement from the top-order in the remaining two games, especially with a demanding home series against India next month.

Although Bashar -- who set a new target to finish sixth by winning the last two games -- has been enjoying a great Caribbean trip with the team's progress, but the 34-year old skipper has failed to deliver the goods with the bat. It will be a personal challenge for him to get back the confidence before the next home series after scoring only 61 runs in his six World Cup innings.

CA's speech reflects

FROM PAGE 1 democratic institutions as well as the local government system.

Bhuiyan also praised the CA's assurance to create a congenial environment for holding free, fair and neutral elections without the influence of black money.

Awami League General Secretary Abdul Jalil in his reaction appreciated the chief adviser for mentioning a timeframe to hold the next general election.

Jalil also hailed the caretaker government for the achievements during the last three months.

Workers Party of Bangladesh described the CA's speech as the reflection of people's desire.

They, however, expressed concern over the CA's silence on the issue of ban on political activities.

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal in their reaction said the CA's speech has helped to remove the uncertainty and concern over holding of the next election and over the future politics of Bangladesh.

Top leaders

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the chairperson even for once since the day Nazmul Huda and others were rounded up.

The question about their role arose when the senior most BNP leader Saifur Rahman hosted a dinner party in honour of a few diplomats and a chosen group of party colleagues, observed a BNP insider.

Later, a statement from Lutfozzaman Babar only added to the misgiving.

In the statement, Babar's personnel officer claimed that the former state minister for home had cautioned Khaleda Zia and Tarique on different occasions that the party might have to pay for the wrongdoings by a section of its ministers, lawmakers and leaders.

"The whole nation has seen the news of a grand dinner thrown by a BNP standing committee member but they could not know what they have in fact talked about," former lawmaker Major (retired) Akhtaruzzaman said in a recent statement.

With a hint of sarcasm, he said he wondered if they had discussed the fate of the party leaders and workers including the chairperson Khaleda Zia.

"The awkward silence of some leaders is leaving the workers and activists even more frustrated," he said, adding that if anyone thinks the party chairperson is the only one to be blamed for the prevailing situation they should quit.

Meanwhile, sources said some of the BNP leaders who joined the ranks from the armed forces and were ministers in the last five years are also playing a mysterious role since the state of emergency declared by the president.

Despite corruption allegations against them, so far none

Australia

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McGrath had Eion Morgan caught by Matthew Hayden in the slips, the first four Irish batsmen contributing just two runs.

There was no respite as McGrath and Tait continued to probe the batsmen during their opening spells.

Middle-order batsman Andrew White suffered a nasty blow on the helmet off a rising McGrath delivery before falling in the bowler's next over, caught by Brad Hogg at mid-off.

Mooney, Kevin O'Brien and Australia-born Johnston offered a little bit of resistance, but it was just not good enough.

O'Brien was caught by Brad Hodge off paceman Stuart Clark, who had replaced Nathan Bracken from the side which defeated England in the previous match.

Johnston dragged a Tait delivery on to his stumps to leave his side tottering at 54-7. Ireland failed to cross the 100-mark as Australia grabbed the last three wickets in quick succession.

9 killed

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Six of the dead were identified as Nizam Uddin, 48, son of Osman Ali and Milton Mondol, 40, son of Mokhlesur Rahman of Satinali village in Panchbibi upazila of Joypurhat district, Sultan Miah, 29, of Bella village under Sadar upazila in Joypurhat, Khalilur Rahman, 38, and Zahidul Islam, 30, of Govindaganj upazila in Gaibandha district, and Enamul, 30, of Gaibandha Sadar upazila.

Identity of the rest could not be known.

According to the witnesses, all the nine were crushed under the sacks of cement.

Local people rescued the injured and sent them to Tangail General Hospital. Being informed, Kalihati police rushed to the spot, recovered the bodies and sent them to Tangail General Hospital morgue for autopsy.

Kalihati police told The Daily Star that the day labourers boarded the truck from Motijheel in Dhaka and were returning to their home in Gaibandha.

In Jhenidah, a schoolteacher was crushed under the wheels of a speeding truck at Bishoykhali Bazar in Sadar upazila yesterday, according to our correspondent.

Tapan Bhattacharya, 50, a senior teacher of Mayamoy high school, met with the tragic end of his life while he was crossing the road at noon.

Protesting the death of Tapan, who was also a radio and TV artiste, locals put up a barricade on the Jessore-Jhenidah road, disrupting traffic for an hour.

The joint forces later arrested the driver and helper of the truck.

Jatiya Party and Palestine Returnees' Mukti Joddha Sangshad also hailed the CA's speech.

Bangalee's biggest carnival

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and places of Baishakh congregations.

Three-layer security measures have been taken to dispel concerns that stemmed from the deadly bomb blasts at the Chhayanaut Pahela Baishakh programme in 2001 killing at least 10 people.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police declared the roads from Shabagh to Matsya Bhaban and from Teachers-Students Centre (TSC) to Doel Chattar off-limits to vehicles.

The day is a public holiday. Numerous social, political and cultural organisations have chalked out elaborate programmes to celebrate the Bangla New Year.

The Institute of Fine Arts yesterday started three-day programmes to celebrate the Bangla New Year.

Students and teachers of the institute will bring out the Mangal Shobhajatra at 9:30am. Puppet show and other traditional cultural programmes will be held at the Bakulatala of the institute from 11:00am.

The Baishakh Udjapan Council will hold cultural functions at different places in the city.

The DU chalked out a five-day Baishakh Festival at TSC from April 15 to 19.

Dhaka City Corporation will keep open the Shaheed Zia Shishu Park for all on the day from 11:00am.

Sammilito Sangskritik Jote will organise cultural programmes at the Rabindra Sarobar amphitheatre in Dhanmondi and the Central Shaheed Minar at 4:30pm.

The Liberation War Museum organises a cultural programme on its premises from 10:00am.

Cultural organisation Monpala organises its programme at TSC from 9:00am to 1:00pm today.

Wrishtil Shilpi Gosthi organises a cultural programme at the Narkelbithi Chhatar on Bhashani Road. Poet Mahbub Ul Alam will be inaugurate the programme.

Amari League President Sheikh Hasina, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and its Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, and Liberal Democratic Party President AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury gave separate messages on the occasion of Pahela Baishakh and conveyed New Year's greetings to the people.

CULTURAL PROGRAMMES

The main attraction of the day is Chhayanaut artistes' rendition of Baishakh welcome songs at Rama Udayan at sunrise.

Sonargaon Hotel will also celebrate Pahela Baishakh with "authentic Bangladeshi cuisine" at its restaurants. There will be arrangements for folk songs.

Suryasen Bitarka Dhara will organise an open debate at the DU business studies faculty at 7:00pm.

Publication house Oitiya will sell its books at 40 percent discount from its Banglabazar outlet on the day.

The Dhaka Club will celebrate Pahela Baishakh by holding a session of folk and patriotic songs.

The Bengal Foundation has arranged a three-day music programme at the Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts from yesterday.

Sangskritik Jote and Jogsutro will hold a cultural programme at Jahangirnagar University.

Among other organisations, Gulshan Society, Baridhara Society, Bangladesh Chhakra Maitree, Bangladesh Kite Association, Pratibandhi Kalyan Society, Dhakabashi, Benku Institute of Fine Arts, American International University have chalked out celebration programmes.

Sources said they would call on the villagers to join them to establish Islamic rule, rejecting all 'manmade' laws. Bayazid Khan Panni of Tanguil is their leader.

Ramzan Ali of Chatian and Basiruddin of Baot used to train the militants at secret places in the evening. The training would continue till the dead of night.

The local people also named one Saharul Islam as the leader of the Gangni upazila unit of Hizbut Toudih.

The law enforcers who have rounded up militants from other parts of the country were largely inactive in Meherpur district.

Police sources said they did not arrest the Hizbut men in the area as they were operating under cover of Tablib Jamaat (proselytising group).

Locals said at least 40 Hizbut men left the area on April 3. With their wives and children, they left the villages without any fuss and no one could say anything about their current whereabouts.

Meherpur police said they have been informed of the developments and are keeping a close watch.

"We will take stern measures against the militants. I've already ordered the local police to be on the alert," Superintendent of Meherpur Police Khondokar Rashidul Islam told The Daily Star.

This correspondent visited the houses of Hizbut leader Ariful and Gangni upazila Amir Saharul on Wednesday.

"I'm not seeing my son since March 20. I don't know where he has gone and why," said 68-year-old Halima, Ariful's mother.

Besides, Saharul is now believed to have been hiding in Kushtia, a source said.

Police said they recovered a list of at least 45 active Hizbut men during their raid on Saturday.

8 Hizbut Touhid men

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LATER

At night, a team of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) arrested Gangni upazila Hizbut Touhid chief Shaharul Islam and six others--Abdur Rashid, Tajmuj Rahman, Ariful Haque, Shah Jamal Hossain, and Harisudin--when they were holding a meeting at a field near Gangni Bazar.

Rab sources said the arrestees have admitted that they have long been involved in Islamic militancy.

Police said they had been out to nab Anis since he and some 50 other militants fled the neighbourhood on April 3.

Later on April 7, the law enforcers recovered some books and leaflets from the abandoned houses of Hizbut men, police in Meherpur said.

Sources said the clash broke out when a group of locals, worried over the activities of Hizbut Touhid operatives, attacked their houses.

In another clash between villagers and militants at Poradah Bazar, at least 45 people were hurt on September 9 the same year. The fighting took place when some Hizbut men went there to call on the locals for jihad.

Thirty-four of the men were arrested at Kaliganj upazila of Jhenidah in July 2004 while Kushtia police arrested 13 at Courtpara of the town in August last year.

According to locals, the militant group has a strong base in Kushtia, Meherpur, Chaud