

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 wrestled 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 firefight 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.

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

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.

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 south-eastern 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 week 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.

Top leaders

FROM PAGE 16 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) Akhtaruazzaman 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

FROM PAGE 15 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

FROM PAGE 1 Six of the dead were identified as Nizam Uddin, 48, son of Osman Ali and Milton Mondol, 40, son of Mokhesur 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 upzila 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.

Bangalee's biggest carnival

FROM PAGE 1 and places of Baishakhi 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 Shahbagh to Matsya Bhaban and from Teachers-Students Centre (TSC) to Doel Chatter off-limits to vehicles.

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

Bangladesh Betar and all television channels will air special programmes and newspapers will publish special supplements.

The start of Bangla year with Baishakh has its roots in the days of Mughal Emperor Akbar during 1556-1609. According to one of several opinions about the origin of Bangla year, this was the time when peasants used to pay their taxes to the emperor.

When Bangladesh came under the Mughal rule in 1576, Akbar decided to adopt the Hijri year and termed this season "Fasali" (crop). Thus, Pahela Baishakh marked the start of the crop season.

The present form of the Pahela Baishakh celebrations has some political significance and was introduced in 1965 when Chhayanaut organised its celebration programmes in protest against the suppression of Bangalee culture by the then Pakistan government.

After independence in 1971, the festival became a symbol of the country's nationalist movement as well as an integral part of the people's cultural heritage.

Awami 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 Baishakhi welcome songs at Ramna Udyan at sunrise.

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 Bakultala of the institute from 11:00am.

The Baishakh Udjan 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.

Wrisbiz Shilpi Gosthi organises a cultural programme at the Narkelbithi Chatter on Bhashani Road. Poet Mahubul Ul Alam will be inaugurate the programme.

Bangladesh Shishu Sangathan Oikya Jote will organise a "dress as you like" programme for children at Bangladesh Shishu Academy at 9:00am.

Pink City will organise a celebration programme at East Baridhara in the afternoon. Justice Latifur Rahman, Justice Mohammad Abdur Rouf, Justice Sultan Hossain Khan and other renowned personalities will be present at the programme.

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 Oitijya 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 Chhatra Maitree, Bangladesh Kite Association, Pratibandhi Kalyan Society, Dhakabashi, Benuka Institute of Fine Arts, American International University have chalked out celebration programmes.

Project

FROM PAGE 16 about Tk 2.27 crore for setting up similar systems in four more zones -- Dhaka Kotwali, Tejgaon, Mirpur and Dhanmondi.

But as the work began, influential vested interest groups allegedly led by the then former deputy land minister had Engineer Tahub Alam, the then assistant commissioner of Demra circle, transferred to the local government ministry, although he had been overseeing the pilot project quite efficiently as its coordinator before the transfer, the ministry sources added.

Besides, the ministry granted the work order for the second phase to Development Planners and Consultants (DPC) instead of CEGIS.

Since then, the new software developer and the government officials could not make much headway into the project although the fund had been spent, the sources said.

Mahmudur Rahman, managing director of DPC, claimed that they completed their job in accordance with the contract with the land ministry.

"We've done our part and the rest is not our concern," he said.

Despite completion of the project in Demra circle, the land ministry did not issue any order allowing the land courts and others concerned access to the information stored in CLMS. Had the tribunals been provided computerised records, there would have been reduced land disputes in Demra zone by now.

Although the number of land cases keeps rising due to availability of fake documents, the land ministry remains indifferent to the urgency of resuming the project.

At present around 32 lakh cases are pending in the courts. And even more astounding is the fact that 15 crore names are listed as accused in those cases when the country's entire population according to the last census is less than that, said sources in the land ministry.

Most of the cases were filed on the basis of forged documents, they added.

Rejoinder

FROM PAGE 16 thus question of bypassing any senior official does not arise.

He also claimed that he never lobbied for regularisation of his promotion to the post of controller of examinations.

Robul admitted that he was made officer on special duty (OSD) on June 16, 2002 but said no charge was framed against him.

Denying the allegation of misappropriating Tk 8.97 lakh of a World Bank funded project on PSC reforms, he claimed that he submitted the project expenditures also details at the eighth general meeting on August 30, 1998.

Explaining the expenditures of the amount, he said Tk 1.32 lakh was given as fees to a computer consultancy firm, another amount of Tk 1.32 lakh recovered from that firm was deposited with the government treasury. Tk 1.65 lakh recovered from another consultancy firm for introducing management information system was deposited with the government treasury, and Tk 6 lakh was paid to two other companies.

The PSC accepted the expenditures, Robul said.

8 Hizbut Touhid men

FROM PAGE 1 Later at night, a team of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) arrested Gangni upazila Hizbut Touhid chief Shaharul Islam and six others--Abdur Rashid, Tajmur Rahman, Ariful Haque, Shah Jamal Hossain, and Harisuddin--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.

A list of 45 local militants was among the documents seized. The papers detail how the outfit operates, police sources said.

While most of the Hizbut Touhid men were still holed up, Anisur came to his village on Thursday night.

According to locals, the Hizbut Touhid has been active at Debipur, Chatian, Bauot, Harbhanga, Karamdi and Kaldah villages in Gangni upazila for the last eight years. Ariful Islam of Debipur village would lead the organisation.

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

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

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

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 Tabliq 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 Touhid 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-years-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 Touhid men during their raid on Saturday.

Of them, 12 hail from Chatian village, nine from Debipur, six from Bouat, Four from Karamdi, eight from Harbhanga and four from Kaldah village.

Different sources including law enforcement agencies and newspaper reports said at least 1,200 trained cadres of Hizbut Touhid are active in greater Kushtia including Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga and Jhenidah. Most of them are madrasa students or imams of mosques.

A woman follower of the outfit was killed in a clash with villagers at Jugia on the outskirts of Kushtia town in September 2003. At least 25 others were injured in the incident.

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 their 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 sources, the militant group has a strong base in Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga and Jhenidah.

Moudud

FROM PAGE 1 after the former law minister had returned home from a visit to a friend's house.

The law enforcers who went there in five vehicles entered the house and conducted extensive searches in all rooms of the two-storey building. Sources said the law enforcers even searched through all the books.

They also interrogated Moudud intermittently during the raid which lasted for almost 11 hours, sources said.

"I came to the house at 8:00am and found the joint forces. At 9:40am the joint forces took sir (Moudud) away in a jeep with a suitcase in his hand," Moudud's personal assistant Shahidul Islam told The Daily Star.

He also said Moudud was not allowed to talk to anyone during the raid.

Moudud's son Aman Moudud and his wife were in the house during the raid. The former law-maker's wife Hasna Moudud is now on a visit to London.

Officer-in-charge of Gulshan Police Station Obaidul Haque said the seized saris bear seals marking them as relief goods not for sale.

The joint forces earlier arrested scores of ministers, lawmakers, leaders of major political parties, and businessmen as the caretaker government stepped up its nationwide crackdown on corruption since assuming power.

The already arrested high-profile personalities include former prime minister Khaleda Zia's eldest son Tarique Rahman, and his close friend and business partner Giusuddin Al Mamun.

WB president

FROM PAGE 16 focus on all relevant governance implications for the bank."

The controversy engulfing one of the architects of the war in Iraq threatened to overshadow talks Friday among finance ministers from the wealthy Group of Seven nations.

Ahead of the bank's annual spring meeting this weekend, whose formal agenda threatens to be engulfed by the dispute, Wolfowitz said Thursday "I will accept any remedies" proposed by the executive board.

"I made a mistake, for which I am sorry," Wolfowitz told a news conference. He said that "in hindsight, I wish I had trusted my original instincts and kept myself out of the negotiations" over Riza's generous pay deal.

But his mea culpa was not enough for the World Bank's staff association, which said Wolfowitz had "destroyed" the trust of employees and should quit.

"He must act honorably and resign," the de facto union said in a letter to the World Bank's 10,000 rank-and-file staff.

In an editorial Friday, the Financial Times newspaper also called for Wolfowitz to go, either voluntarily or at the behest of the board.

"If the president stays, (the World Bank) risks becoming an object not of respect, but of scorn, and its campaign in favor of good governance not a believable struggle, but blatant hypocrisy," it said.

But the conservative US newspaper Wall Street Journal called the controversy "trivial" in an editorial.

"The forces of the World Bank status quo are now making their power play," the Journal wrote, suggesting the fracas involved resistance to Wolfowitz's efforts to

make the bank and its borrowers more accountable.

The controversy has become a deep embarrassment for Wolfowitz just as he battles to overcome skepticism about his campaign against corruption in the 185-member World Bank's multi-billion-dollar lending.

He is also under fire from veteran staffers for his management style, following a series of clashes with the board and hostility towards his appointment of Republican Party allies to jobs in his inner circle.

But Wolfowitz, a "neoconservative" hawk whose nomination two years ago by the US government was controversial given his role in the Iraq war -- he was the Pentagon's deputy secretary of defence from 2001-2005 -- insisted on his "passion" for the bank's mission to relieve grinding poverty worldwide.

The newly released documents included an August 2005 memorandum in which Wolfowitz ordered the bank's human resources division to award Riza the extraordinary pay increases.

Contrary to accounts given by Wolfowitz's office, the board also said that neither it nor the World Bank's ethics committee had approved the arrangement.

That account appeared to leave Wolfowitz more isolated than ever, following his defence Thursday that he had acted in "good faith" with the World Bank's best interests at heart.

A letter dated April 9 from Riza to the Dutch World Bank official leading the investigation was also published. In it, she complained that she had been the subject of "the most vicious public attacks."