

Israel launches new airstrikes on Hamas

AP, Gaza City

Israeli airstrikes targeted Hamas for a fifth straight day yesterday, hitting a rocket squad and two workshops in Gaza, and the defense minister warned militants who attack Israel they should be "very afraid."

But Defence Minister Amir Peretz also said now is not the time for a major Israeli ground offensive in the Gaza Strip.

Hospital officials said two Palestinians were killed and four wounded in the latest Israeli strikes.

Days of Israeli air attacks on Hamas targets have coincided with a surge in deadly infighting between Hamas gunmen and rivals from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah faction. Yesterday, the two groups reached a new cease-fire deal, pledging to pull fighters off the streets and exchange hostages, officials from both sides said.

Previous truce agreements quickly collapsed in recent days, and it was not clear whether this one would hold. Failure to stanch the bloodshed would spell the end of the shaky power-sharing agreement Hamas and Fatah reached two months ago to end a previous round of internal strife.

Clashes erupted outside the home of a senior Fatah official in Gaza City as the latest truce was reached, and security officials said several people were wounded. In the course of the gunbattle, the convoy of a Fatah-allied colonel in the Palestinian intelligence came under fire, but no one was hurt.

Later, however, teams of representatives from the various Palestinian militant factions went around to buildings to make sure gunmen had come down from rooftops. Once rooftops are cleared, an exchange of an unknown number of hostages kidnapped during the past week is to begin. Other faction members removed roadblocks that had been erected during the fighting to identify gunmen from rival factions.

Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said he expected the latest truce to stick because of Israel's military strikes.

"No one would accept to fight one another while the Israelis are shelling Gaza," he said.

Israel launched its latest round of airstrikes on Tuesday to counter a stepped-up barrage of Hamas rockets on Israeli border towns. The militant group, which refuses to recognize Israel's right to exist,

has fired nearly 120 rockets at southern Israel since Tuesday, the military said.

Yesterday, Israel missiles slammed into a rocket squad near the northern Gaza town of Beit Hanoun, the army said.

Earlier in the day, missile strikes demolished two suspected Hamas metal workshops.

Saturday's two deaths brought to 22 the number of Palestinians killed in airstrikes in the past week.

Peretz warned militants involved in rocket operations should be "very afraid," because "it is our intention to act against Hamas."

"We are mainly focusing on sensitive locations tied to Hamas," he told Israel Radio, adding that these locations included rocket workshops.

Asked whether Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas and the head of Hamas' military wing, Ahmed Jaber, could also be targets, Peretz said he would not rule out any action that "makes it clear to everyone that we don't intend to allow anyone to harm Israeli citizens."

At the same time, he said Israel would not embark on a major offensive in the Gaza Strip because it had other, unspecified tools in its arsenal to use against rocket-launchers.

Israel's Security Cabinet is to meet on Sunday with senior defense officials to discuss the rocket attacks and how to respond, Israel media reported.

Four rockets hit the border area Saturday, causing damage, but no injury. A day earlier, four Israelis were hurt in rocket attacks.

Peretz said Israel is worried by Hamas' efforts to extend the range of its rockets, which include training in Iran.

The Israeli airstrikes have driven Hamas fighters out of their bases, prompting accusations that Israel is helping Fatah.

Peretz insisted Israel is not interfering in the internal fighting. However, he also said that "we certainly would like the moderate forces to emerge with the upper hand," a reference to Fatah.

Biman

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Biman is also planning to buy new generation aircraft as part of its restructuring.

A private operator will be appointed to run the airlines on a commercial basis, said the source.

Talking to The Daily Star recently, Managing Director (MD) of Biman MA Momen said,

"We have 13 aircraft (seven of those now in operation) now and 4,800 staff. So, the excess manpower will have to be reduced."

He said, "Under the VRS, those who have completed 25 years of service would be asked to retire."

But Biman will try to ensure that its skilled officials and employees do not go into retirement under this scheme.

Implementation of the VRS scheme will require Tk 300 crore, and the World Bank has already given this amount to the government, sources said.

"We are trying to bring Man-Equipment Ratio (MER) [ratio of aircraft to manpower] of Biman to a reasonable level to reduce its expenses by 40 to 45 percent," said the Biman MD.

Biman's MER at present is 1:367 while the acceptable ratio is 1:200. Singapore Airline's MER is 1:152, Malaysian Airline's MER is 1:146 and Emirates' MER is 1:294.

About the proposed program and rules of business, Biman officials said working system would be made more computer oriented. "No helping hand like personal secretary) would be provided for high officials anyone," one official said.

Biman now has Air Service Agreement (ASA) with 42 countries, of which it uses only 18.

"After becoming PLC, Biman will take all initiatives that a commercial organisation or a PLC takes," the MD said.

Jadid al Qaeda

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blasts is going on.

Bombs were set off at Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet railway station on the day, leaving one person injured.

Later, a militant organisation, "Jadid al Qaeda Bangladesh", claimed responsibility for the serial blasts.

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Nepal Maoists

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"We'll start a nationwide strike and peaceful protests from Sunday if the government fails to make a decision to improve camp conditions," Maoist leader Prachanda said on Saturday, according to state-owned Nepal Television.

"Most of our fighters are living in inhuman camp conditions," Prachanda told reporters in Pokhara, 140 kilometres (87 miles) west of Kathmandu.

Management of the camps is the responsibility of the government but "it (the government) has not been serious enough in tackling the issue," he said.

Some 31,150 Maoist fighters are in the camps.

"Most of our fighters are living in straw and plastic-covered shelters. There is no electricity or clean water," Nanda Kishor Pun, Maoist deputy commander and vice chairman of the joint arms management committee told AFP.

"When there is strong wind and rain it becomes impossible to stay," he said. "We want the government to address our problems right away as the conditions will only worsen because of the fast-approaching monsoon."

The ultra leftists launched their "People's War" in western Nepal in 1996. However, they now say they have renounced violence and will work within a democratic system.

Since making peace, the former insurgents have been given five ministerial portfolios in the government.

At least 13,000 people had been killed in the conflict by the time the government and Maoists signed the peace deal last year.

ISPR clarifies

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explain the technology of data collection, the team prepared two cards of journalists in 11 and 8 minutes, it said.

The team has explained if the data are readily available at the voter camp like the demonstrated one, then 12,000 field units as planned by the EC, after completing the deployment, will require six months to complete the registration process by using laptop, the rejoinder added.

It, however, said this did not include other factors like procurement of equipment, software loading after import, recruitment of 24,000 operators, their training and setting of establishment etc. Collection of data can only begin after all those have been completed.

The news regarding time requirement to prepare voter list has created confusion and misled the readers, the rejoinder said, adding: "We urge all concerned to collect and provide realistic news and the proper evaluation of the published subject".

Jalil

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The AL leader said they will hold the national council of the party as soon as the restrictions on political activities go.

About the 14-party alliance, he said the coalition is still there but the position of the parties will be decided considering the changed circumstances.

Charges pressed

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Sadique, executive engineer Shaful Islam, executive engineer Khaleque Miah and district BNP leader Mouvli Wai Siddiquee.

Naser, Moyun and Arif are in jail custody. Earlier, Naser was arrested at his Gulshan home in the capital. On March 4, he was placed on a three-day remand and quizzed. He is now in Comilla Central Jail.

In the case Nuruzzaman said the then lawmaker Naser Rahman through Moyun called him to the house of Sylhet city BNP chief Ariful in Sylhet on October 10, 2003.

He claimed that Naser in presence of others told him to give him Tk 2 crore since he was doing contractual jobs worth Tk 30 crore in the district. The officials of Roads and Highways, who were also present there, demanded 10 percent of each bill he received payment of, the complainant added.

He said Naser and other became furious when he refused to pay. He later informed Saifur Rahman who allegedly had the work orders awarded him cancelled. He said he explained his discomfiture at a press conference in Dhaka Reporters Unity (DRU) office on October 24, 2003 and several newspapers carried a news item on it.

The complainant said the published news angered Naser and others and they filed a number of false cases against him and had him arrested on November 18, 2003. He claimed that he was beaten in police custody by some BNP men at Srimangal Police Station.

The Roads and Highways officials, under pressure from Naser, cancelled all his work orders. However, the cancellations were later declared illegal by the High Court after the complainant filed five writ petitions. The court also ordered the restoration of his contractual jobs.

He said he could not file the case earlier as the finance minister and his son were in power, he added. However, days after filing this case Nuruzzaman was arrested in a case lodged with Gowainghat Police Station. He is in the jail custody now.

EC proposal

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recommended holding fresh polls in such constituencies.

Election Commissioner Brigadier General (ret'd) M Sakawat Hossain said the EC will consider the recommendations.

On de-linking front organisations from the political parties, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) ATM Shamsul Huda said the EC has asked the government to repeal the political party act formulated in 1978 during the rule of Ziaur Rahman that allowed a party to have such front organisations.

"Now, we are including some new provisions in the Representation of People Order 1972 asking the political parties to dissolve their front organisations otherwise they will not get registration," Huda said.

According to the EC draft proposals, no registered political party shall form any front organisation with the students of any educational institution. The registered political parties will not also form any front organisations with the teachers of any public or non-government educational institutions, which receive financial aid from the government.

"No registered political party shall form any front organisation with the employees of government and non-government financial institutions, or commercial or industrial establishments, and a registered political party shall not engage in activities of any labour organisation. The registration of a political party shall stand cancelled for non-compliance with the provisions," said the EC proposals.

The original draft proposals disclosed on April 5 included giving the EC authority to cancel candidature on grounds of gross irregularities, making political parties' registration mandatory, restriction on retired military or civil servant, loan defaulters, utility service bill defaulters and NGO officials to contest parliamentary election.

The draft also proposed restriction on a person to contest election from more than three constituencies at a time. The EC also proposed making public the wealth statements of the candidates.

A renowned editor said the EC should draft a proposal to prevent political parties from contesting the parliamentary election unless they are registered and involved with the political process for a certain period.

A few journalists also criticised the criteria for wholesale disqualification of candidates to contest the parliamentary election, arguing that these restrictions will prevent many honest people from contesting the next polls.

According to the draft proposals, government and non-government officials cannot contest the parliamentary election within three years of their retirement.

The journalists said a civil

bureaucrat has the scope to misuse his office during the service to achieve political goals, but a school-teacher does not have such scope.

Regarding civil bureaucrats, the CEC said former cabinet secretary MA Halim and former secretary Khondakar Shahidul Islam started election campaigns even before their retirement and they got encouragement.

Referring to Modabir Hossain Chowdhury, the CEC said a person who was campaigning for election was even made an election commissioner.

These cannot be allowed, he said.

The CEC also said the EC asked the local government ministry to formulate laws to prevent all sorts of graffiti during election.

Referring to neighbouring India, a few editors proposed holding staggered election—several polling days.

Fayez Ahmed, senior journalist, ABM Musa columnist, Golam Sarwar, editor of daily Jugantor, Abed Khan, editor of daily Samokal, Ataus Samad, adviser-editor of daily Amar Desh, Nurul Kabir, editor of daily New Age, Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury, editor and managing editor of news agency BSS, Amanullah Kabir, editor of daily Amar Desh, Abdul Quayum, joint editor of daily Prothom Alo, and Farid Hossain, bureau chief of AP, among others, were present at the discussion.

Earlier on April 4, the CEC at a meeting with the law adviser asked the government to lift the ongoing restriction on indoor politics allowing the EC to hold talks with the political parties to finalise the electoral reform proposals. The EC held talks with eminent persons on April 26.

Duty-free cars

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Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed is yet to receive the letter signed by 15 high-profile US senators that ask the government to withdraw the state of emergency immediately and announce a detailed roadmap within two months for holding the elections at the earliest.

Meanwhile, the council decided to form a committee for exploring ways to expedite bureaucratic processes by reviewing the rules of business in the ministries.

The council looked at how authority could be delegated through updating the rules and regulations and reviewed the list of pending tasks of ministries, which were asked to be prioritised as quickly as possible.

The advisers also discussed in detail to standardise all public utility services in order to maintain consistency and make those more convenient for the public.

Gas leakage

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Tengratali blowout remedial operations, and its alleged negligence had caused the second blowout.

"Unsolicited deals are no problem in emergencies. But Titus field situation has become stable from last month, and we now have an opportunity to get the most cost effective consultant through an open tender," said an official.

"Besides, the GSM's proposed remedial action has been criticised by Bapex as a very risky operation. At this point, we should not take an unnecessary risk. Till last month, the situation was different. But now we have the option of going for less risky solutions," he added.

The GSM proposed sinking of a snubbing unit to 'kill the well at its root'.

Bapex believes that gas is flowing in a very high pressure, and if the snubbing unit gets stuck or broken in the process of installing it inside the well, it will trigger a blowout.

The official insisted on pursuing an alternative proposal from Bapex, saying that pumping barite chemical in the affected well to seal off leakage of gas is the least risky and most cost effective method. "Even if Bapex is not doing it, some efficient company should be given this task," he added.

Another source said due to unidentified leakage, Titus field's well-3 was producing only 15 million cubic feet per day (mmcf) gas for the last one year. After Bapex's mid-April intervention, the same well is producing more than 32 mmcf since last month.

"This means because of ignorance, Bangladesh Gas Field Company Ltd (BGFL) was allowing a daily wastage of 15 to 18 mmcf gas for long one year," he pointed out. Monetary value of this wasted gas is a staggering amount.

The well is now leaking around 1 mmcf gas in a controlled manner. This leaked gas is being burnt for safety reasons.

But gas is still leaking through various points of the ground in at least one km area close to well-3, which is about three km off well-3. Sources said this gas emission might continue for a year and then subside.

The subsist layer of this area is charged with gas that leaked out from well-3 and moved to that area," noted an official.

The remedial action taken by Bapex in mid-April has ultimately sealed the main leakage from well-3, which was identified as the main source of the problem in the gas field in early March by General Manager of Bapex's Well Services Department Yusuf Ali Talukder. Earlier, an experts' committee thought well-10 was the main trouble spot since gas leakage was taking place close to it.

Bapex's mid-April operation

Six killed in Peru market blast

AFP, Lima

A stick of dynamite exploded during a music show at a market in southeastern Peru, leaving six people dead and 51 others injured, police said Saturday.

An unattended bag containing the dynamite was set on fire during an alcohol-fueled celebration in the middle of the wholesale market in the city of Juliaca late Friday, police said, ruling out terrorism.

Many people were injured in the chaotic aftermath of the explosion, which sparked a stampede for the exits at the International Tupac Amaru Market, a hospital spokesman said.

"A bag with explosives that had been forgotten in the market was set on fire and exploded, leaving people dead," said national police 12th district police chief Raul Becerra.

"It was an irresponsible and involuntary act, a product of alcohol," he said, noting that people had been drinking since the afternoon.

Iran building first 'indigenous' nuclear plant

AFP, Tehran

Iran has begun building a nuclear power plant using indigenous technology and know-how, the deputy head of Iran's atomic energy organisation was quoted as saying yesterday.

"Building of the first indigenous nuclear plant with a capacity of 360 megawatts has started," state-run television quoted Mohammad Saedi as saying.

He did not say where the plant would be located, but added: "Iran will join the club of countries that build nuclear plants in the next 10 years."

Saedi added that Iran's first nuclear power station, which is being built by Russians at Bushehr in the south of the country, will be launched by the end of the Iranian year in March 2008.

Its launch and fuel delivery have been delayed by what the Russian contractor has said were financial problems with Tehran.

The United States, which is spearheading an international campaign against Iran's disputed nuclear programme, has urged Russia to halt construction of the Bushehr plant.

Iran is under United Nations sanctions for its refusal to suspend uranium enrichment, the process, which the West fears could be diverted towards atomic weapons development.

Tehran insists that its enrichment programme is aimed only at making nuclear fuel to meet the growing energy needs of its population.

In August 2006 Saedi said that Iran was working on a 360-megawatt light water reactor to produce electricity.

It is also building a 40-megawatt heavy water reactor in Arak, central Iran, which is scheduled to be completed in 2009.

EC plays safe

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[in November]," he said adding that the commission has raised the number of teams to 12,000 from 8,000 as it wants to finish voter-listing even earlier.

The poll chief was speaking to editors and senior journalists of different national dailies on the EC's draft proposals for electoral reforms.

"I am a cautious man and that's why I said we would need 18 months to prepare the roll. The task might be completed within 12 months. But I won't say that because I know if it's not done by that time I will be torn to shreds," Huda said replying to queries from journalists.

He said the 18-month time frame began from May 1.

The CEC on April 5 announced that 18 months would be needed for simultaneous preparation of a voter list with photographs and national identity cards. Of the time, six months were meant for the preparatory work and the rest for field level task.

A team of experts from the Bangladesh Army Wednesday said the field level work could be completed in six months.

The next day the secretary to the EC Secretariat said the commission disagrees with the timeline, terming it hypothetical.

However, the CEC yesterday refuted any suggestion of conflict with the armed forces over the issue.

"I think the army experts have calculated only the time for the field level work, whereas many things are to be done before and after that," he said.

"The troops will be involved only in one-fourth of the task. The army chief has already told me that they are not willing to get into the hassles of purchasing equipment. Their time begins from receiving the equipment," Huda said referring to his conversation with the chief of army staff.

He said school teachers, and members of the Ansars and Village Defence Party will work for voter-listing while the army personnel will co-ordinate the gathering and processing of particulars of the prospective voters.

About the national ID cards, the CEC said initially provisional cards will be issued to the voters. Later, they will get the permanent cards on surrendering the temporary ones.

IMMIGRATION UPROAR Bush rushes to patch up rift with allies

AFP, Washington

President George W Bush rushed yesterday to patch up a sudden rift with his most faithful Republican allies, who have supported him on Iraq but have now revolted against a White House-backed immigration reform proposal.

With top conservatives crying "sellout," the president used his weekly radio address to emphasize hurdles rather than opportunities as estimated 12 million illegal immigrants will have to face if they choose to legalize their status.

"This legislation will end chain migration by limiting the relatives who can automatically receive green cards to spouses and minor children," Bush said.

He added that future immigration decisions will be based on the level of applicants' professional skills, education and English proficiency rather than family ties to those already in the United States.

Some conservative scholars have expressed concern the reform may pave the way to the United States for as many as 50 million newcomers over the next several decades because legalization will make the 12 million illegals now in the country eligible to bring in family members.

The bipartisan compromise, announced by a group of US senators with great fanfare on Thursday, establishes a temporary worker program that illegal aliens would be able to join by applying to a renewable "Z" visa and paying a \$5,000-dollars fine.

But it will allow program participants to eventually seek permanent residency and citizenship, although only after returning to their countries of origin.

Bush quickly endorsed the proposal and reiterated his support Saturday, saying the reform will "respect respect for the law, and meet the legitimate needs of our economy."

But he is facing an open revolt on the Republican Party's right flank that has staunchly supported him on Iraq and now feels betrayed by the White House.

"It's a big government fantasy with no hope of becoming reality," said Newt Gingrich, a former Republican speaker of the House of Representatives who is now mulling a 2008 White House run, commenting Friday on the reform proposal.

Republican Representative Tom Tancredo called the immigration plan "a slap in the face" of hard-working Americans.

"The president is so desperate for a legacy and a domestic policy win that he is willing to sell out the American people and our national security," Tancredo said.

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney argued the plan amounted to amnesty while Senator Elizabeth Dole vowed to oppose it "unless it radically altered."

Senator Jeff Sessions, an Alabama Republican who has strongly supported the president on Iraq, declared himself "deeply concerned" by the bill, while Texas Governor Rick Perry said he "simply cannot, and will not, support any legislation" that would offer undocumented aliens amnesty.

Even Senate Republican Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Bush's

G8 leaves

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to find a successor. He has not ruled out nominating a non-American, even if that looks unlikely.

The ministers paid tribute to Wolfowitz, who resigned this week in a pay scandal at the institution, and cited his work in Africa.

"We express our appreciation to World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz for his service to the bank and his commitment to responsible development and poverty reduction, particularly in Africa," they said in a statement.

Wolfowitz, widely credited with raising Africa's profile in the bank's lending activities, agreed to leave his post on June 30 in the face of accusations he violated bank rules in arranging a promotion for his girlfriend, a bank employee.

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