

Taliban negotiate for S Korean hostages

AP, Kabul

Afghan clerics and tribal elders yesterday intensified negotiations for the release of 22 South Koreans kidnapped a week ago by the Taliban, as the latest of several deadlines set by the militants approached.

Talks with the captors went until late Thursday and resumed early Friday morning, said Ali Shah Ahmadzai, police chief of Ghazni province where the hostages were taken. The body of one hostage riddled with bullet holes was found Wednesday.

"Everything is going very well," he said.

But another official involved in the negotiations said talks were difficult because of conflicting demands by the South Koreans' captors.

"There are still a lot of problems among them," police chief Khwaja Mohammad Sidiqi of the Qarabagh district in Ghazni said Friday.

"One says, 'Let's exchange them for my relatives,' the others say, 'Let's release the women,' and yet another wants a deal for money," he said earlier.

Ahmadzai said the Taliban had told negotiators the hostages were being given food and water, and that their health was fine.

In Seoul, a Foreign Ministry spokesman said the South Korean government believed there was no serious problem with the hostages' safety, and that it was trying to deliver them medicine and daily necessities. The spokesman, who spoke on condition of anonymity citing protocols, said the government is "maintaining multisited contacts" with the hostage-takers.

The Taliban on Thursday reiterated their demand that jailed militants be freed in exchange for the captives it seized on July 19, and set the latest of several deadlines Friday at noon, local time for the condition to be met or more hostages would be killed.

One of the group of abducted Koreans, 42-year-old pastor Baek Hyung-kyu, was found slain with multiple gunshots on Wednesday in Qarabagh.

Local tribal elders and religious clerics who have respect among the people of Qarabagh have been conducting negotiations by telephone with the captors for several days.

Qari Yousef Ahmadi, who claims to speak for the hard-line Islamist Taliban, said they had been contacted by Afghanistan's deputy interior minister, Maj. Gen. Muhammad Munir Mangal, who said the government would make a decision regarding the militants' demands by noon Friday.

"If Kabul administration does not solve our problem ... then we do not have any option but to kill Korean hostages," Ahmadi said.

"The Taliban are not asking for money. We just want to exchange our prisoners for Korean hostages. ... When they release the Taliban, we will release the hostages," Ahmadi said by phone from an undisclosed

US troops, Mahdi Army clashes in Karbala

9 more GIs die in attacks

AFP, Baghdad

Clashes erupted between the US military and the Mahdi Army militia in Iraq's Shia shrine city of Karbala yesterday, killing nine people and wounding several more, security officials and medics said.

The fighting broke out shortly after midnight when US forces rolled into the city, and resumed later in the morning as people were evacuating the dead and wounded, according to a local police officer who asked not to be named.

Dr. Aziz al-Ghanimi of the Al-Hussein General Hospital confirmed there had been fighting and said the hospital had received nine bodies and admitted 23 wounded people.

The US military could not immediately comment on the incident.

At least three of the dead were Mahdi Army fighters, according to Razak al-Musawi, a local spokesman for the political movement of radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which commands the militia.

"The Americans were looking for a well-known member of the Mahdi Army named Hamza Matrud. There were three people killed and seven wounded from the Mahdi Army," he said.

Cities in south-central Iraq have seen several running battles in recent months between rival Shia militias and US and Iraqi forces.

Meanwhile, nine more US troops have died in Iraq, including three marines and a sailor killed in a day of fighting in the restive province of Diyala north of the capital, the military said on Thursday. Another American soldier was killed in combat in Iraq's volatile Diyala province northeast of Baghdad on Thursday, the US military said on Friday.

His death comes two days after four US troops – three marines and a sailor – were killed in the same province, where thousands of US and Iraqi troops are pressing a month-long assault on alleged al-Qaeda strongholds in Diyala.

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The latest fatalities took the US military's losses in Iraq since the March 2003 invasion to 3,642, according to an AFP count based on Pentagon figures.

Earlier on Thursday the number of US commander in Iraq told reporters that US casualties seemed to be declining since May, calling it an "initial positive sign" that a five-month-old security plan was showing results.

"We will have to continue the project if we are to link ourselves with countries like Thailand and Singapore," Gen Saw Tun told journalists. He said it's a tri-nation (Bangladesh-Myanmar-China) project.

Matin said further discussions are necessary to implement the entire project that also involves China. "We will discuss the matter with China at the next meeting of BCIM in Myanmar," he added.

BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar) is an international forum on regional economic cooperation among the four countries.

Matin said Bangladesh, China and Myanmar will carry out feasibility studies on the proposed tri-nation (Bangladesh, India and China) road. A Chinese delegation that visited Dhaka about a month ago too have emphasised the need for having the tri-national road and developing the seaports.

He said the BCIM car rally that was earlier scheduled for sometime in November, would now be held in March next year.

Flood closes in on Dhaka

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danger levels at Goalundo and Bhagyalakshmi respectively. More areas in the districts of Manikganj, Munshiganj, Faridpur, Rajbari, Madaripur, and Shariatpur, and in Dohar and Nawabganj of Dhaka are likely to get inundated.

Our correspondent from Pabna reported that Nagarbari-Aricha ferry service remained suspended in the last two days. Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) officials said they are shifting Nagarbari ferry terminal 200 metres from Pratappur point.

The intermittent rainfall that continued for the third consecutive day yesterday, caused waterlogging in the low laying areas of the district headquarters.

Our correspondent from Sirajganj reported that around 200 villages in 55 unions of the district are now reeling under water including 10 villages in the municipality area, as 60 metres of a dam at Khokshabari point on the western part of Jamuna got washed away yesterday.

Moreover, eight bridges, including a portion of Nailsapara Bailey Bridge, collapsed disrupting road link between Sirajganj and Kazipur. Agricultural Adviser CS Karim visited the area.

Our correspondent from Chandpur reported that ferry service between Chandpur and Shariatpur have been suspended since Thursday, as Horina ferry terminal got flooded.

A Shariatpur bound ferry with 12 buses, and goods laden trucks on board ran aground at a shoal in mid-Meghna Thursday afternoon, officials said.

Our staff correspondent from Bogra reported that around 50,000 people of Sariakandi and Dhunat upazilas were marooned, most of the seasonal crops in the area were damaged, and fishes in ponds were washed away.

Thousands of people in the area took shelter on higher places.

Explosion in an electric transformer a week ago also brought added sufferings for the

marooned people, while Baniajan spur there is running the risk of collapsing due to the rising Jamuna at Dhunat.

Our correspondent from Netrakona reported that 48 unions of eight upazilas got flooded leaving more than one lakh people marooned. Many of the marooned people took shelter on highlands in flood shelter.

The newly affected unions are Thakurakona union of Netrakona Sadar, Nayekpur, Jahangirpur and Gobindshree unions of Madan upazila, Kailat and Kalmakanda Sadar upazila, Netrakona Water Development Board (WDB) officials said.

Around 75 educational institutions were forced to close down their operations due to the flood. On rush of water from hilly areas across the border, and erosion along the bank of the River Someswari in Durgapur upazila, damaged one kilometre flood protection embankment at Kullagara.

Local administration sources said 10 flood shelters were opened in Kalmakanda and Durgapur upazilas yesterday.

A correspondent from Comilla reported that WDB yesterday identified 28 risky points on 140km embankments on both banks of the River Gomti, which was flowing 1.3cm above the danger level. WDB also started repairing 125 points on the dam where water had been leaking through.

The upazilas affected the worst by the flood are Choudhagram, Laksam, Nangolkoat, Sadar South, Muradnagar, Barura, Burichang and Chandina.

According to the Department of Agricultural Extension, aus paddy on 13,625 hectares of land, vegetables on 2370 hectares of land, arid seedbed on 1,770 hectares of land, and Taman on 21 hectares of land went under floodwater, while fishes worth of

12,000 metric tons of rice and 30 cartons of biscuits for 2,175 flood affected families of five unions.

Mannan Bhuiyan

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In reply to a question, he said, "We are working hard for holding the council as soon as possible."

In compliance with the party constitution, they will seek permission of the party chairperson for holding the council, Bhuiyan said.

"We will decide later on," he replied when asked what they will do if the chairperson does not give her consent.

Bhuiyan, a former LGRD and cooperatives minister, on June 25 announced draft reform proposals for changes in party constitution to make the party more democratic.

Later, he also announced a comprehensive proposal to make parliament effective, ensure good governance and form a national security council.

According to BNP sources, party leaders are almost divided over the reform issue as Bhuiyan-led group wants to implement reforms by holding council as soon as possible.

But Khaleda Zia has expressed her reservation over the activities of Bhuiyan-led group.

Terming pro-reform leaders betrayers during a teleconference with leaders of Australia chapter of BNP recently, she alleged some of her party leaders are conspiring to split the party in the name of reform.

The former prime minister said she also wants reforms in the party, and is preparing proposals for this. But those will be finalised at the council to be held after withdrawal of the ban on indoor politics, she added.

Pro-reform leaders however told reporters time and gain that they cannot wait for long and will seek permission from the party chief and the government for holding the council soon.

They are planning to hold the council keeping the party chairperson away if she does not consent to it, party sources pointed out.

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Mawa ferry points

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people individually use the ferries to cross the river towards Dhaka and towards the south and southwestern parts of the country each paying Tk 10 for the so-called terminal facilities.

Recently, the Zila Parishad of Faridpur has introduced a terminal tax of Tk 7 for each passenger using the Char Zanazat side of the ferry.

The gangs are so powerful that anyone refusing to pay them is instantly barred from taking the ferry and subjected to an indefinite delay to board another. At times the ruffians even damage the wheels of the vehicles by sharp weapons.

The youths we arrested confessed sharing the money but there was no evidence left behind these deals that had been in practice for years," he added.

Other sources said these gangs also subject hundreds of makeshift shops on both sides of the ghats to regular tolls.

"The ferry users on their way to different destinations are yet to grow a confidence in the law and order and the criminal opportunists take full advantage of this lacking," said the official of the joint forces.

An official of the joint forces in Faridpur said they were in pursuit of the Char Zanazat hoodlums and extortionists after the declaration of emergency state. They also arrested four alleged members of the extortionists' gang.

"All the 10 walkie-talkies are out of order for the last one year. Despite repeated reminders we have not received the repaired sets yet," said an official.

Some trust and confidence in the present government, another former RU VC Prof Saidur Rahman Khan said.

"Other patrons of the militants, especially Jamaat men and administration officials who aided them, should also be punished," he added.

All the patrons of JMB should face justice, said Workers Party politburo member Fazle Hossain Badsha who had received death threat from militants on several occasions.

Expressing his happiness, Abdul Bari, a torture victim who is still residing in Rajshahi city in fear of the militants' aides, said, "Korban [one of the militants jailed with Aminul] used to boastfully say that they would rule as long as Tarique Zia was behind them. I did not anticipate that they would be punished so quickly."

Family members of the victims of torture in Atrai, Raniganj of Naogaon, Bagmara in Rajshahi and Nalanda in Natore have demanded execution of the Special Branch Kamal Uddin.

Sylhet Kotwali police filed a case on the day of incident. The case was later transferred to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) as police failed to find clues to the attack.

Munshi Atiqur Rahman, senior ASP of the CID, filed two charge-sheets—one under Explosives Act and the other for killing—with the Sadar Magistrate's Court.

On June 26 this year, the magistrate court sent the case records and charge sheets to the District and Sessions Judge's Court for trial.

They made Mukul's crying during the torture heard in the neighbourhood through a loudspeaker.

"I want godfathers of militants to be tried just before us as they tor-

tured and killed people in open torture cells," said Ismail Hossain, father of Yasin Ali who was beaten to death after the militants hung him upside down from a tree in front of Kodapara Madrasa on June 29, 2004.

"Militants dragged me out of classroom. I could count 30 hits of my father's rod until I lost consciousness. My father sold lands to bear my treatment cost. I am yet to know what my faults were," said Abdul Malek, a class nine student of Hamirkutsa High School demanding hanging of JMB patrons.

The JMB militants started the so-called 'outlaw cleansing operation' through open murder of Wasim Osman Babu on April 1, 2004 and they killed over 25 persons and maimed some 500 people in only four months.

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demanded execution of the JMB patrons.

"Yells of my son to save his life still drive me with horror. I want similar death of the JMB patrons," said 65-year-old Khodeza Begum, mother of Golam Rabbani Mukul.

Tortured in public on April 16, Mukul succumbed to his injuries on April 16.

He fell unconscious around 8:00pm while under treatment at the Khulna Surgical Clinic. He died at 4:30am yesterday. His body was taken to his village home at Jamira under Phultala upazila of Khulna for burial.

He claimed that following his release from jail, a large number of party activists from home and abroad had talked to him demanding actions against those trying to create indiscipline in the party.

An accused, sentenced to life imprisonment for looting firearms from Gurudaspur Police Station in Natore in 1987, was arrested in the city's Mirpur yesterday.

The BNP leader, released recently from jail, said there is nothing like requisition meeting in the BNP constitution.

"Some people are trying to make political blackmail in the name of requisition," he said, adding, "Their ill design will not succeed."

Referring to the changed tone of the pro-reformists in BNP, Hannan Shah said they have been forced to soften their tone realising the situation on the ground.

He claimed that