

# Khaleda's role

**FROM PAGE 1**  
exploring block 12 through a fax in 1992. Later, during a visit to the USA, the then PM Khaleda Zia held a meeting with Occidental president. Afterwards, without any tendering process the government started an unsolicited negotiation for blocks 12, 13 and 14.

The government in July 1993 announced a petroleum policy outlining an incentive package for foreign investors in oil and gas sectors. In September that year, the government held a promotional roundtable in Houston to attract oil and gas investors. Yet, without any bid, the government in the same month started processing the unsolicited negotiation with Occidental through signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU). In November, Khaleda approved the MoU. The production sharing contracts for these blocks were signed on January 11, 1995.

The Magurghara blowout took place in June 1997. Two government committees investigated the blowout and filed their reports by July 1997 blaming Occidental's operational negligence. Yet no move was taken to claim for the compensation until July 1, 2002 when Petrobangla made a claim of \$685 million compensation from Occidental. In response Occidental (then Unocal) said a 1998 supplemental agreement had increased 5 percent production share in favour of Bangladesh and that addressed the compensation issue. The government on

August 2005 formed a committee on the matter. That committee mysteriously refrained from filing its report.

According to another allegation, the government in 1994 awarded a three-year licence to Australian company BHP to explore Phulbari coal zone. This licence expired in 1997. But in 1998, this licence was transferred to Asia Energy and the government illegally approved it.

But Asia Energy could not use that licence to work in Bangladesh.

Khaleda, however, created the scope illegally for Asia Energy to work in Bangladesh by changing her own orders repeatedly. Later, Asia Energy was allowed to develop the Phulbari coal mine by depriving the nation of huge financial returns.

Meanwhile, Canadian company Niko Resources was awarded the unexplored gas field of Chhatak in disguise of a marginal gas field through a joint venture with Bapex.

The deal, that illegally gave away national resources worth crores of taka to Niko, was forged in connivance with the then law minister Moudud Ahmed, the then state minister for energy Mosharraf Hossain and Khaleda Zia.

# Edible oil prices

**FROM PAGE 1**  
shopper in Purbia Raja Bazar area of the capital, wanted to buy half a litre of soybean oil, when the retailer asked for Tk 46 for the amount of the essential commodity, she became infuriated.

While visiting Moulvibazar in Old Dhaka, the largest distribution market for edible oils in the country, The Daily Star found most of the retailers and small scale wholesalers, who had come to buy oils from there, returned empty-handed as the distributors were saying they were running short of oil stock.

Some distributors were charging buyers unusually high prices. Some buyers were purchasing a litre of soybean oil for Tk 84 even at the largest distribution market in the country, where all the edible oil wholesalers of the capital make their purchases, and which even supplies the essential commodity to different district and upazila level wholesalers.

A wholesaler in Karwan Bazar preferring anonymity told The Daily Star, "Due to pressures from different quarters, we are forced to keep the price of soybean oil between 86 taka and 87 taka, but after adding carrying cost and other related expenses we won't be able to make any profit from selling it for that price."

Azmat Ali, a salesman at Sayeed and Brothers in Moulvibazar, said, "We placed an order to Teer Oil Company for 1,800 litres of soybean oil on July 7, we also made an advance payment, but the company has yet to supply the oil."

A number of businessmen in Moulvibazar said although they paid oil companies months ago for edible oils, they are yet to receive the supply. Since they paid the oil companies from loans they had taken from banks, they will have to count interests in the meantime, they added. The interest

rates on the wholesalers loans too will be added to the retail price of the commodity, shooting it up further, the wholesalers said.

They also alleged that some large scale distributors in Moulvibazar placed orders for humongous amounts of edible oils to producers and importers paying them in advance, and hoarding the supply adding an artificial pressure on the already real acute shortage of edible oils in the market. Those unscrupulous distributors are creating an artificial crisis in anticipation of an astronomical increase in demand for edible oils in the coming month of Ramadan, when they plan to release the hoarded oils in the market for shot up prices.

Normalising the edible oil market demands ensuring proper supply of oils through a large number of importers, said the wholesalers in Moulvibazar.

"But due to the ongoing drive against corruption, around 60 percent importers stopped importing," said an importer who claims that he also had stopped importing in fear of the government's wholesale drive.

## Khaleda

**FROM PAGE 16**  
Some 20 JCD activists, led by RU JCD Joint Convenor Dewan Harunur Rashid Mamun, talked with Khaleda for 10 minutes from 12:15am from a house at Meherchandi in the city.

Asked about activities of Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and Hannan Shah, she said it does not matter what others are doing. You should stay unified. "Time will say what to do".

She said those who are creating anarchy will face action according to the constitution of the party.

1,358 with skin diseases, 270 with eye problems, and 4,840 with various other diseases.

Meanwhile, Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC) said floodwater in the central and south-central districts might recede slower due to a land depression over West Bengal and adjoining areas of Bangladesh.

The overall flood situation in the country is improving and the situation is likely to improve significantly in next two days, added the FFWC.

According to flood control room of Press Information Department, till yesterday, the flood has affected over 1.6 crore people in 251 upazilas of 39 districts.

It damaged some 59,501 houses completely and 8,62,657 houses partially. Crops on 6,79,615 acres of land have been damaged completely while crops on 6,78,1388 acres of land have been damaged partially.

Furthermore, the flood damaged 2,558 km of road network completely and 21,334 km partially. A total of 510 educational institutions have been completely damaged and 6,517 educational institutions have been affected partially.

Besides, the flood damaged 79 km of embankments completely and 716 of them partially. Some 72 bridges and culverts were damaged completely while 1,536 were damaged partially.

## Flood-hit

**FROM PAGE 1**  
USAID's acting administrator Henrietta Holman Fore.

"The devastation of the recent floods in Bangladesh demand immediate action and humanitarian relief," he said adding that over 20 million people have been displaced by the severe flooding and over US\$ 1 billion worth of damages has been inflicted on the country's infrastructure, agriculture and garment industries.

## OMS to start

**FROM PAGE 1**  
Participants admitted that it would not be possible to control prices of essentials merely with the interference of law enforcers.

Replying to a question, he said businessmen will not be harassed by law enforcers. The government will concentrate more on expanding BDR market facilities for the public, instead of interfering in the traditional markets.

Earlier on Tuesday, the council of advisers discussed the market situation and directed the ministries concerned to take proper measures.

Under the OMS programme, 1.14lakh tonnes of rice will be sanctioned to 15,000 dealers, each distributing 510kg.

The government is also planning to import 4.5 lakh tonnes of rice and 3.5 lakh tonnes of wheat before Ramadan, meeting sources said.

Five wholesale markets and 48 retail outlets of essentials will be set up in Dhaka before Ramadan under the supervision BDR. At present BDR operates 271 shops in different parts of the country.

The five wholesale markets will be established at Uttara Dipu market, Gabtali Dipjal market, Uttara furniture market, Jatrabari and Kamragir Char.

Meanwhile, BDR and Agriculture Ministry have jointly initiated a move to produce crops in different areas in cooperation with farmers. The crops will be marketed through BDR shops.

Mustakim said TCB will be activated to play a significant role to keep market prices at tolerable level. The government plans to import 500 tonnes of edible oil and 200 tonnes of grams through TCB by next month.

## RMG factory

**FROM PAGE 1**  
rampage stopped at 4:30pm. Some members of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) also came on a jeep around 3:15pm and left the scene shortly.

The situation finally came under control when army men intervened sometime after 4:30pm.

Two female workers told reporters that they did not get overtime of three months. Another worker of cutting section said he neither got the salary of July nor three months' overtime. He also alleged of Michael's misbehaviour with the workers.

BGMEA Director Ferdous Ahmad and Chittagong BGMEA Joint Secretary Md Mainuddin along with others went to the factory and reached a negotiation, under which the factory management will pay the workers the salary of July today.

Mainuddin said, "I do not believe that workers can go berserk like this for arrear of just one month. There might be something else behind the attack."

The BGMEA president said the matter of unpaid salaries could have been resolved through mutual discussion. "The workers also have the option to lodge formal complaint at the BGMEA Crisis Management Cell...They could even approach the joint forces or other authorities," he told The Daily Star.

The owner of the garment Mostafizur Rahman, chairman of Crown Group, is now in abroad on vacation.

## Hannan Shah

**FROM PAGE 16**  
Later, they were also sued in several other criminal cases. The High Court granted them bail in those cases.

Barrister Rafique-ul Huq, assisted by Barrister Mahbubuddin Khokan, stood for Hannan Shah and his son.

## 4 of a family

**FROM PAGE 1**  
leaving the three siblings dead on the spot, and then ran over the rickshawpuller at about 3.30pm.

Hosne Ara and the rickshawpuller who could not be identified immediately were sent to Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH) where doctors declared them dead, police said.

Police seized the truck but its driver managed to slip away.

With the latest incident of reckless driving, 22 people have died in four road accidents in last five days in Chittagong district.

# Bangabandhu

**FROM PAGE 1**  
tight security.

Due to government restrictions the AL could not hold discussions, bring out mourning processions, use loud speakers to play Bangabandhu's historic speech of March 7, 1971, and display posters or placards. AL usually observes August 15 with elaborate programmes including discussions and large processions.

**TIGHT SECURITY MEASURES**  
Tight security measures were taken from the early morning at Road 32 at Dhanmondi and around Banani graveyard, setting up metal detector arches.

Police put barricades at the entrances of Road 32. A large contingent of police with water cannon and riot and prison vans were kept on alert at Road 32 and Banani graveyard.

Crowds started gathering in the morning and by noon, it stretched from Road 32 to Kalabagan, creating serious traffic congestion on Mirpur Road.

Although the government did not officially observe the day, the AL, its front organisations and different groups observed Bangabandhu's death anniversary as a national mourning day.

The day used to be officially observed as a national mourning day during the AL rule between 1996 and 2001. But the BNP-led alliance government, after coming to power in October 2001, scrapped the day's official status.

National and party flags were hoisted at the half-mast alongside black flags at all party offices across the country.

Senior leaders of AL led by acting president Zillur Rahman first placed wreaths at Bangabandhu's portrait at 8:00am, observed one minute silence and offered special prayers for the salvation of the departed soul.

Later, they went to Banani graveyard, placed floral wreaths and offered special prayers for the salvation of all the departed souls of those who were assassinated on the day in 1975 with Bangabandhu. Talking to the reporters, Zillur demanded the government officially declare Bangabandhu as the Father of the Nation and release Bangabandhu's daughter, AL President Sheikh Hasina, from internment.

Senior AL leaders including Zohora Tajuddin, Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, Abdur Razzak, Tofail Ahmed, Motia Chowdhury, Mukul Bose, Abdul Mannan, Mahmudur Rahman Manna, Akhtaruzzaman, Sultan Mohammad Mansur Ahmed and Abdur Rahman among others placed wreaths. Immediately after the AL central leaders placed wreaths, the party's front organisations, other political parties, social and cultural organisations also laid wreaths.

AL leaders Col (retd) Faruk Khan, Abdul Latif Siddique and Advocate Abdul Matin placed wreaths at the grave of Bangabandhu at Tungipara and offered fataha. Special prayers were arranged

in mosques, churches and temples across the country. Foods were also distributed among flood victims and orphans at different orphanages.

Family members of Bangabandhu, led by Sheikh Akram Hossain, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) president Hasanul Haque Inu, Moinuddin Khan Badai, Syed Zafar Sazzad, Gono Forum leaders Engr Abul Kashem, Mofizul Islam Khan Kamal and Mostafa Mohsin Montu also placed wreaths.

Bangladesh Islami Oikya Jote offered special prayers at business office of the party chief.

Dhaka University Teachers' Association, Sammilito Sangskritik Jote, Bangladesh Bar Council, Supreme Court Lawyers' Association, Muktiyoddha Parishad, Peshajibi Samannay Parishad, Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists, National Committee to Observe August 15, Bangabandhu Parishad, Jatiya Char Neta Parishad, Dhaka Ainjibi Samity, Jatiya Kabita Parishad, Bharat-Bangladesh Sanghati Parishad, Muktiyoddha Sanghati Parishad, Mohila Muktiyoddha Sangsad, Muktiyoddha Paribar Kalyan Sangsad, Muktiyoddho Projanmo, 75-er Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee, BAKSAL, Projanmo 71, Awami Ainjibi Parishad, Bangabandhu Ainjibi Parishad, Shaheed Noor Hossain Sangshad, Sheikh Hasina Mukti Parishad, Dhaka Sarok Poribahan Samity, Khelaghar and many other organisations placed wreaths at the portrait of Bangabandhu.

## Biman flights

**FROM PAGE 16**  
"I fear I would not be able to join work on due time if I cannot reach Malaysia in two days," said a Biman passenger whose flight was rescheduled from 10:45 yesterday morning to 1:00am today.

"My stay permit will expire in two days but my flight is delayed for about 12 hours. I still doubt that the rescheduled flight will not leave on time," said another Malaysia-bound passenger whose flight was rescheduled from 3:00pm to 4:30am.

The long wait at the airport caused untold sufferings to women and children. The awaiting passengers complained of problems regarding bathroom and food.

A Biman high official preferring anonymity said, "We are taking measures considering necessity and urgency of the passengers. As soon as flights are being delayed, we are arranging lodging for the passengers at nearby hotels. We are informing passengers about the flight delay individually or through travel agencies."

# EC invites tenders

**FROM PAGE 1**  
announced earlier that the procurement and deployment of all sorts of hi-tech equipment for voter listing will be completed by October, but now it seems uncertain whether even only the procurement will be completed by the stipulated timeframe.

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) ATM Shamsul Huda yesterday did not say whether the procurement is being delayed due to the re-tendering. "Wait a few days, and you will know everything," the CEC told journalists.

About the much anticipated dialogues with political parties on electoral reforms, the CEC said the commission has yet to fix the criteria for selecting the parties for invitations to sit with it for the talks. He however said they will start sending letters to the parties this month.

In its roadmap announced on July 15, the EC said the voter list with photographs will be ready by October next year and the stalled parliamentary election will definitely be held in December 2008.

In a bid to implement the roadmap, the EC Secretariat on July 7 invited international tenders for supplying 8,000 laptops, 8,000 webcams, 8,000 finger print scanners, 8,000 Bangla keyboards and 3-button mice for computers, 550 desktop computers with UPS and monochrome laser printers, 3,000 portable power generators, 90 more desktop computers with UPS and 64 colour laser printers, and other equipment.

Evaluating the bids, the TEC found only three bidders qualified for supplying laptop computers, finger print scanners, Bangla keyboards, and mice for computers. It recommended that the EC signs contracts with the qualified bidders for supplying the equipment, and invite tenders again for supplying the rest of the required equipment.

The EC Secretariat started selling the tender forms to prospective bidders on Tuesday. Meanwhile, the EC decided not to start the field level task of preparing the voter list in Bogra and Jessore municipalities this month,

## Crowley

**FROM PAGE 1**  
Bangladesh Bank and the finance ministry.

Out of the government's target to disburse Tk 7,698.34 crore as agricultural post-flood agriculture rehabilitation, the BKB alone will disburse Tk 3,550 crore.

The bank has re-fixed its target of disbursing crop production loans at Tk 1,800 crore instead of Tk 1,500 crore.

The BKB has started activities through its 948 branches across the country and formed a special monitoring cell to ensure smooth loan disbursement.

The Krishi Bank has also decided to reschedule the loans of flood-affected farmers for one year. The bank will also give fresh loans to the farmers.

Sources said the BKB raised the interest rate on agricultural loans at 12 percent, but the bank said it made the increase to reduce its loss.

Meanwhile, the finance ministry has suspended the proposal of Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank for increasing the interest rate on agriculture loans.

## Laid-off jute

**FROM PAGE 16**  
The sit-in will hinder payment of other financial benefits to the retrenched workers, which is scheduled to start next Sunday.

Payment of cheques against arrear wages of 15 weeks of remaining 332 retrenched workers could not be continued yesterday due to the protest.

The BJMC paid about Tk 4.90 crore until Tuesday.

## CA, president

**FROM PAGE 1**  
government and myself, I pay my deepest respects to his [Bangabandhu] memory and pray for the salvation of his soul.

"It is my strong believe that everyone irrespective of parties and opinions will come forward unitedly to implement Bangabandhu's dream of building a happy, prosperous and progressive golden Bangladesh."

Bangabandhu's two daughters, Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana, who were abroad on August 15, 1975, escaped the gruesome killings.

## US to scrap

**FROM PAGE 16**  
mandatory Congress approval of the pact, which legislators have vowed to go scrutinize.

Last year, the lawmakers approved in principle the "Henry Hyde Act" allowing transfer of civilian nuclear fuel and technology to India in a move to reverse decades of sanctions imposed after India's nuclear tests.

Despite McCormack's statement Tuesday, there is no mention however of the word "test" in the "termination and cessation of cooperation" clause of the operating agreement, copies of which have been made public.

Unlike virtually every other 123 agreement, which the United States has with other countries, the one with India does not explicitly state that if New Delhi conducts a nuclear test, Washington has the right to terminate nuclear cooperation and demand the return of equipment and technology, US weapons experts said.

The termination cause says only that "the party seeking termination has the right to cease further cooperation ... if it determines that a mutually acceptable resolution of outstanding issues has not been possible or cannot be achieved through consultations."

New Delhi is trying to argue that the 123 agreement does not in any way limit India's fissile material production or nuclear testing options, experts said.

The Bush administration, on the other hand, is attempting to point out that if India tests, the United States would have to, as the Hyde Act requires, end nuclear cooperation with India, they said.

"Both governments are trying to spin this in a way that addresses the concerns of their parliaments and both governments simply cannot be correct," Daryl Kimball, executive director of the US Arms Control Association, told AFP.

"What is happening is that the Singh government and the Bush administration are trying to have it both ways," he said.

"I think the problem here with this 123 agreement is that it is too ambiguous in all of the key areas."

It was such ambiguity that led to problems in 1974 when India fired its first nuclear weapons test, resulting in Washington immediately cutting off nuclear cooperation with India, Kimball said.

The pact for "peaceful" nuclear cooperation signed by India at that time prohibited the use of US or Canadian equipment and technology for building a nuclear explosive device.

"But the Indians argued that the 1974 test was a peaceful one -- which is ridiculous -- and so there was a disagreement and it will ever since then," Kimball said.

"So the 123 agreement sets up New Delhi and Washington for a repeat (of such a scenario)," he said.

## Hasina's bail

**FROM PAGE 16**  
FBCCI chief Abdul Awal Mintoo, Attorney General office sources said.

All the applications will be heard before a six-member full bench of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court headed by Chief Justice M Ruhul Amin today.

# 4 suicide bombings

**FROM PAGE 1**  
from the compound of the state oil marketing company in Baghdad on Tuesday, an official said.

"A gang of armed men dressed in Iraqi security uniforms broke into the compound of the State Oil Marketing Organisation and kidnapped several people, including Deputy Oil Minister Wagaa," oil ministry spokesman Asim Jihad said.

Jihad said the daylight raid on the company's compound, which also houses residential quarters for its employees took place soon after the closing of the offices.

Oil Minister Hussein Shahrastani told state-run television that an investigation had been launched and some hostages were even "freed."

The US military, meanwhile, sought to press its gains against guerrillas. Some 16,000 US and Iraqi soldiers began a sweep through the Diyala River valley north of Baghdad in pursuit of Sunni insurgents and Shia militia fighters driven out of strongholds in recent weeks.

US officials believe extremists are attempting to regroup across northern Iraq after being driven from strongholds in and around Baghdad.

Such a retrenching could increase pressure on small communities such as the Yazidis, a primarily Kurdish group with ancient roots that worships an angel figure considered to be the devil by some Muslims and Christians. Yazidis, who don't believe in hell or evil, deny that.

The Islamic State in Iraq, an al-Qaeda front group, distributed leaflets a week ago warning residents near the scene of Tuesday's bombings that an attack was imminent because Yazidis are "anti-Islamic."

The sect has been under fire since some members stoned a Yazidi teenager to death in April. She had converted to Islam and fed her family with a Muslim boyfriend, and police said 18-year-old Duaa Khalil Aswad was killed by relatives who disapproved of the match.

A grainy video showing gruesome scenes of the woman's killing was later posted on Iraqi Web sites. Its authenticity could not be independently verified, but recent attacks on Yazidis have been blamed on al-Qaeda-linked Sunni insurgents seeking revenge.

The suicide bombings came just after sundown near Qahataniya, 120km west of Mosul, Iraq's third-largest city, said Abdul-Rahman al-Shimir, the top government official in the area, and Iraq army Capt. Mohammed Ahmed.

"My friend and I were thrown high in the air. I still don't know what happened to him," said Khadir Shamu, a 30-year-old Yazidi who was injured in Tal Azir, scene of two blasts.

At least one of the trucks was an explosives-laden fuel tanker, police said. Shops were set ablaze and apartment buildings were reported crumbled by the powerful explosions.

Dhakil Qassim, a mayor in the town of Sinjar near the attacks, said the four trucks approached Qahataniya from dirt roads and they all exploded within minutes of each other.

More than 200 people were killed, confirmed local mayors and Doctor Mohammed Waadallah from the Nineveh governorate, who said another 375 people were lying wounded in seven different hospitals.

"We are still digging with our hands and shovels because we can't use cranes because many of the houses were built of clay," he said. "We are expecting to reach the final death toll tomorrow or day after tomorrow as we are getting only pieces of bodies."

Witnesses said US helicopters swooped in to evacuate wounded to hospitals in Dahuk, a Kurdish city near the Turkish border about 100km north of Qahataniya. Civilian cars and ambulances also rushed injured to hospitals in Dahuk, police said.

"I gave blood. I saw many maimed people with no legs or hands," said Ghassan Salim, a 40-year-old Yazidi teacher who went to a hospital to donate blood. "Many of the wounded were left in the hospital garage or in the streets because the hospital is small."

The Bush administration denounced the bombings as "barbaric attacks on innocent civilians," White House deputy press secretary Dana Perino expressed sympathy to the families of those killed or wounded.

There was no claim of responsibility, but the attack bore the hallmark of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which has been regrouping in the north after being driven from safe havens in Anbar and Diyala provinces.

"This is a terrorist act and the people targeted are poor Yazidis who have nothing to do with the armed conflict," said Qassim, who blamed al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Two weeks after the Yazidi woman was stoned to death, gunmen killed 23 Yazidis execution-style after stopping their bus and separating out followers of other faiths in what was believed to have been retaliation for the woman's death.

The bodies of two Yazidi men who had been stoned to death turned up in the morgue in the northern city of Kirkuk on Tuesday,

six days after they had been kidnapped while en route to Baghdad to sell olives, police said.

"We are still paying the price of a foolish, wrong act conducted by small number of Yazidis who stoned the woman," said 44-year-old Sami Benda, a relative of one of the slain men.

The centre of the Yazidi faith is around Mosul, but smaller communities exist in Turkey, Syria and other places.

Elsewhere, a US transport helicopter crashed near an air base in western Iraq, killing five troopers, the military said. The CH-47 Chinook helicopter was conducting a routine post-maintenance test flight when it went down near Taqaddum air base, the US military said.

Four other US soldiers were reported killed in combat three in an explosion near their vehicle Monday in the northwestern Ninevah province. The fourth died of wounds suffered in western Baghdad.

The deaths raised to at least 3,700 the number of US military personnel who have died since the Iraq war started in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count.

Baghdad was spared major violence in another sign that a six-month-old security crackdown in the capital is disrupting extremists' firepower. But the brazen daylight raid on the Oil Ministry complex showed that armed gangs can still embarrass authorities.

Dozens of gunmen wearing security force uniforms stormed the compound and abducted a deputy oil minister and four other officials who were spirited away in a convoy of military-style vehicles.

The kidnappings similar to a commando-like raid on Iraq's Finance Ministry in May included Abdel-Jabar al-Wagaa, a senior assistant to Oil Minister Hussain al-Shahrastani, said Assem Jihad, the oil ministry spokesman.

Al-Wagaa and four other officials with the State Oil Marketing Organisation were taken away by more than 50 gunmen in military-style vehicles, said an Interior Minister official, speaking anonymously because he was not authorised to release the information. Five bodyguards were wounded in the raid, the official said.

On May 29, five Britons were seized in a similar raid on Iraq's Finance Ministry. They were taken by gunmen wearing police uniforms and have not been found.

Both government organisations are near Sadr City, a stronghold of the Mahdi Army militia loyal to radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

The raids were reminiscent of an attack by Mahdi Army fighters, dressed as Interior Ministry commandos, who stormed a Higher Education Ministry office Nov. 14 and carried off as many as 200 people. Dozens of those kidnap victims were never been found.

Just north of the capital, a suicide truck bomber devastated a key bridge on the highway linking Baghdad with Mosul. Police said at least 10 people died. The Thiraa Dijla bridge in Taji near a US air base 12 miles north of the capital also was bombed three months ago, leaving only one lane open.

The violence punctuated a day when 16,000 US and Iraqi soldiers began a sweep through the Diyala River valley in a new operation north of Baghdad in pursuit of Sunni insurgents and Shia militiamen driven out of Baquba and Anbar province over the past several weeks.

Lt Col Michael Donnelly, a military spokesman in northern Iraq, said the force included 10,000 Americans and 6,000 Iraqis. He said US aircraft used more than 30,000 pounds of munitions to block routes and destroy known and suspected heavy machine gun positions.

The Air Force also dropped 9,000 pounds of bombs to attack an al-Qaeda in Iraq training camp, which included bunkers, living quarters, weapons and ammunition caches, Donnelly said.

Three suspected militants had been killed and four booby-trapped houses destroyed, he said, citing preliminary reports.

In Washington, Defence Department spokesman Bryan Whitman said the new operation was one in a series planned over the next 30 days to try to blunt expected attempts by al-Qaeda in Iraq to influence events during "this critical period" as the top US commander in Iraq, Gen David Petraeus