

Benazir assassinated

Suicide attacker shoots her in neck, chest before detonation; 20 others also killed; violence erupts all over Pakistan; 3-day mourning declared

AGENCIES, Rawalpindi

Pakistani opposition leader and former premier Benazir Bhutto was assassinated at a party rally in Rawalpindi yesterday.

She was shot in the neck before a suicide bomber blew himself up at a park in the northern city, killing around 20 people, after Benazir had just addressed her supporters.

Benazir's supporters erupted in anger and grief after her death, attacking police and burning tires and election campaign posters in several cities. At the hospital where she died, some smashed glass and wailed, chanting slogans against President Pervez Musharraf.

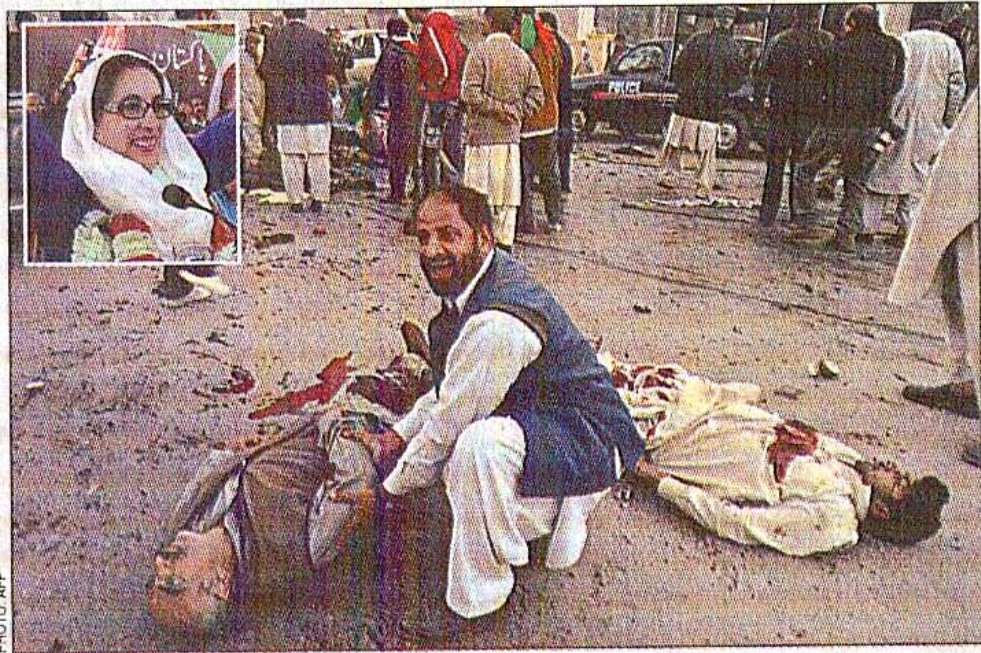
The death of the 54-year-old charismatic former prime minister threw the campaign for the January 8 election into chaos and created fears of mass protests and an eruption of violence across the country.

The attacker struck just minutes after Benazir addressed a rally of thousands of supporters in the garrison city, 13km south of Islamabad. She was shot in the neck and chest by the attacker, who then blew himself up, said Rehman Malik, Benazir's security adviser.

Benazir was rushed to the hospital and taken into emergency surgery.

"At 6:16 pm she expired," said Wasif Ali Khan, a member of Benazir's party who was at Rawalpindi General Hospital.

"The surgeons confirmed that she has been martyred," Benazir's



A smiling Benazir Bhutto, inset, minutes before her assassination in Rawalpindi yesterday. A Benazir supporter desperately cries out for immediate care of two people wounded in the suicide blast that left at least 20 others dead. Turmoil in Karachi as her exponents set a bus ablaze.

lawyer Babar Awan said.

Benazir's supporters at the hospital exploded in anger, smashing the glass door at the main entrance of the emergency unit. Others burst into tears. One man with a flag of Benazir's Pakistan People's Party tied around his head was beating his chest.

Some at the hospital began chanting, "Killer, Killer,

Musharraf," referring to President Pervez Musharraf, Benazir's main political opponent. A few began stoning cars outside.

"We repeatedly informed the government to provide her proper security and appropriate equipment including jammers, but they paid no heed to our requests," Malik said.

Pakistan police used tear gas

and batons to break up an angry demonstration Thursday in the city of Peshawar after the assassination of Benazir, an AFP reporter on the scene said.

More than 100 angry Bhutto supporters blocked the main trunk road in the northwestern city, torching billboards and posters of the main party behind President Pervez Musharraf, a Bhutto rival,

before police moved in.

Nawaz Sharif, another former premier and opposition leader, arrived at the hospital and sat silently next to Benazir's body.

The body of Benazir was taken from hospital in preparation for a flight to her hometown of Larkana, an AFP reporter on the scene said.

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Attack on Sharif rally; 4 killed Sharif to boycott poll

AGENCIES, Rawalpindi

Government party supporters clashed with backers of opposition leader Nawaz Sharif near the Pakistani capital yesterday, killing four people in the worst violence so far in the campaign for January 8 elections.

Former Prime Minister Sharif was about a mile away when the pro-government supporters

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Dhaka condemns assassination

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed has strongly condemned the assassination of former Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto, calling it a cowardly and unpardonable crime.

The foreign ministry in a press release yesterday said the chief adviser condemned in the strongest term the cowardly attack that

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Qaeda not blamed yet

HAMID MIR, from Islamabad

The park where Benazir Bhutto was killed last night was the same spot where Pakistan's first prime minister Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated in 1953. That's why the park is called Liaquatbagh.

I met Benazir Bhutto a few days ago when I reminded her of the threat to her life. She replied:

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World shocked

AGENCIES, Washington/London

From Moscow to Washington to New Delhi and points in between, dismay and condemnation poured forth yesterday over the assassination of Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, along with concern for the stability of the volatile region.

World leaders condemned the assassination and warned that extremists must not be allowed to destabilise the country ahead of next month's vote.

Governments worldwide urged Pakistani leaders to work to maintain calm, as President Pervez Musharraf appealed to the nation to remain peaceful "so that the evil designs of terrorists can be defeated," stateTV said.

The UN Security Council in an

emergency meeting strongly condemned the assassination of Benazir and called on all Pakistanis to show restraint and maintain stability.

The United States, treading a delicate line in its dealings with Pakistan, condemned the bombing attack that claimed the life of Benazir.

"The US strongly condemns this cowardly act by murderous extremists who are trying to undermine Pakistan's democracy," President Bush told reporters hours after Benazir was killed.

"We obviously condemn the attack that shows that there are people out there who are trying to disrupt the building of democracy in Pakistan," said Deputy State Department spokesman Tom Casey.

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Analysts wary of aftermath in S Asia

ASHFAQ WARES KHAN

Foreign Adviser Iftikhar A Chowdhury urged Pakistan to contain the aftermath of the killing of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto for South Asia's sake while analysts fear that the act might embolden militants in the region.

"For the sake of South Asia, Pakistan will have to ensure that the aftermath is better managed than the timeframe in which the events led to the assassination," Iftikhar told The Daily Star last night.

"Everything will depend on how

the aftermath is managed," he said adding that Bhutto's assassination is a tragedy of "gargantuan proportions".

Meanwhile analysts told The Daily Star last night that the militant elements that killed Bhutto will see her death as a 'crucial' success that would encourage the like-minded forces in the region to engage in similar operations.

They said Bangladesh would have to heighten its vigilance on militant activities in the country or risk an increase in similar attacks, especially on February 21 and on

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Statues stolen from custody of Air France: Govt French embassy pledges cooperation in probe

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Cultural Affairs Secretary ABM Abdul Howk Chowdhury yesterday said the two Vishnu statues were stolen from the custody of Air France.

The 42 artefacts sent to France on December 1 are being brought back home, he told the journalists at his office.

"The two statues didn't go missing from us. We have documents showing that Air France received all the 13 cartons containing 147 artefacts from us. Those were handed over to courier service Homebound assigned by the French government," he said.

Meantime, the French embassy in Dhaka said they would fully

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ZIA-based smuggling ring destroyed stolen artefacts

Claims Rab after arrest of 10 more but fails to recover remains in daylong search; motive still unexplained

JULFIKAR ALI MANIK and PINAKI ROY

After five days of artefact theft from Zia International Airport (ZIA), investigators yesterday said a ring of smugglers based at the airport destroyed the precious archaeological masterpieces and dumped them in a dustbin in Uttara.

The revelation was stunning although the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) could not recover the broken pieces of the stolen statues even after conducting massive raids in different areas following confessional statements of the arrested suspects.

Rab officials raided dumping

grounds, including those at Uttara, Jatrabari, Aminbazar and Savar, and thought to have found some pieces from two dumping grounds in Aminbazar and Savar. The National Museum authorities, however, said those do not match the stolen artefacts—a statue and a bust of Vishnu.

The investigators could not also determine the motive behind the theft and destruction of the artefacts. But the police said it was learnt from the confessional statement that the leader of the smuggler group has links to an Islamic organisation.

They are presently on a drive to capture the leader of the "Abbas-

Nasir" ring, which is involved with the whole incident.

Both Abbas and Nasir are still absconding. The Rab raided Abbas' residence but failed to find him or learn his whereabouts.

Meanwhile, the president accepted the resignation letter of Ayub Quadri, who stepped down as the cultural and education adviser on Wednesday amid uproar over artefact theft.

Rab sources said the Abbas-Nasir group based at ZIA conducted the theft through a few of its members with the help of some civil aviation staff and drivers.

The two 1,500-year-old

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PHOTO: STAR

Rapid Action Battalion personnel with the help of Dhaka City Corporation workers search for the remains of the two stolen Vishnu statues at a garbage-dumping site in Amin Bazar on the outskirts of the capital yesterday.

Political parties hail Quadri's decision

Mainul blames it on media

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Law Adviser Mainul Hossain yesterday accused the press of creating an embarrassing situation for former cultural affairs adviser Ayub Quadri that led to his resignation from the council of advisers.

Three other advisers also said his quitting the post is unfortunate but said the decision was altogether personal.

Different political parties, meantime, welcomed the former adviser's decision, saying his choice is a good sign and demanded stern action against those responsible for the highly publicised heist of the two artefacts from Zia International Airport.

Quadri, who was also in charge

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ORIENTAL BANK SCAM

Orion chief gets life for embezzling Tk 6.7 crore

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A special court formed to adjudicate graft cases jailed Orion Group chief Obaidul Karim for life and five high-ups of Oriental Bank for different terms in a Tk 6.7 crore embezzlement case yesterday.

Four of the bankers were sentenced to three years imprisonment each, while another was given a one-year term.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) filed the case on February 1 for embezzling the



Obaidul Karim

amount, which is part of Tk 596.6 crore Obaidul siphoned off from 2003 through a unique "Adjustable Blocked Account (ABA)" created by the bank.

Obaidul, the majority shareholder of Oriental Bank, was also accused in another case filed on January 25 against 24 people for embezzling Tk 596.44 crore in connivance with his bank's high officials and some managers.

The bank filed the case on orders of Bangladesh Bank (BB)

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NRBs urged to help build better Bangladesh

1,400 expatriates gather in city for unique conference

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Around 1,400 expatriate Bangladeshis congregated in the city yesterday kicking off the first ever Non-Resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) conference where eminent citizens called for their assistance in meeting the country's massive challenges.

The opening ceremony at Dhaka Hotel Sheraton of the three-day conference, organised by Scholars Bangladesh, brought together expatriate Bangladeshi scholars, professionals and community representatives to find ways to contribute to Bangladesh in trade, academia and technical expertise.

The conference will comprise around 20 seminars and will be concluded tomorrow with Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed attending the concluding ceremony.

No correct figure of NRBs is currently available but unofficial estimates put the number of expatriate Bangladeshis around 50-80 lakh.

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