

US says Iran still training Iraqi militias

AP, Baghdad

The US military said there had been a dramatic drop in the number of Iranian weapons being used in Iraq but no let-up in Tehran's training and financing of Iraqi militias.

Washington has accused Tehran of supplying Shi'ite militias in Iraq with sophisticated weapons, including deadly armor-piercing bombs known as explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), to attack American troops. Tehran denies the charge.

"We do believe that the number of signature weapons that have come from Iran and have been used against coalition and Iraqi security forces are down dramatically," U.S. military spokesman Rear Admiral Greg Smith told reporters in Baghdad.

"We do not think levels of training have been reduced at all. We don't believe levels of financing are reduced."

His comments come at a time of heightened tensions between Iran and the United States after Washington said its warships were threatened by Iranian craft in the Strait of Hormuz earlier this month. The two countries are already at odds over Iran's determination to pursue a nuclear program.

U.S. officials had softened their rhetoric towards Iran in recent weeks, partly attributing a sharp drop in violence in Iraq since June to Iran stemming the flow of smuggled weapons. U.S. forces also released a number of Iranian detainees.

Smith said there was an upswing in the number of EFP attacks reported in the first two weeks of January.

"There was an increase, we don't know why precisely... and now they have returned to normal levels," he said. "It is uncertain what is happening inside Iran to lead to that."

U.S.-IRANIAN MEETING
U.S. and Iranian officials were scheduled to meet in mid-December for a fourth round of talks on quelling violence in Iraq. The meeting was cancelled because of time pressure on U.S. diplomats as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made a hurriedly arranged visit to Iraq.

Iraqi government spokesman

Alli al-Dabbagh said no new date had been set for the meeting.

Smith said Iran continued to exert a "negative influence" in Iraq, with militia groups still being trained inside the Islamic Republic late last year, after Tehran had made a pledge to the Iraqi government to support efforts to end violence.

Many of the militiamen being trained in Iran are considered renegade members of Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army. Sadr has ordered a six-month ceasefire that expires in late February so that he could reorganise his splintered militia.

The U.S. military says the Mehdi Army has been replaced by al-Qaeda as the greatest threat to peace in Iraq, and has launched a major offensive against the Sunni Islamist group in four northern provinces and Baghdad's southern outskirts.

Smith said 121 militants had been killed, including 92 "high-value targets," since the operation began on January 8.

In an attack that bore the hallmarks of al-Qaeda, a suicide bomber killed six people in western Anbar province on Sunday, including a member of a Sunni Arab tribe involved in fighting the militant group, officials said.

The attack was the second deadly bombing in as many days in Anbar, where violence has plunged in recent months after local tribes joined with the U.S. military to push al-Qaeda out of much of the vast region. Many militants relocated to the north.

Smith said documents seized in an operation suggested that 90 percent of the group's suicide bombers were foreigners, along with much of the leadership, while the rank-and-file were Iraqi.

In 2007 al-Qaeda militants killed 3,870 civilians and wounded almost 18,000, in 4,500 attacks, he said.

Al-Qaeda was "in an almost constant state of fleeing," making it hard to plan and carry out attacks, a U.S. military intelligence analyst told a small group of reporters.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, he said there was considerable friction between Iraqi and foreign members but al-Qaeda remained a "flexible and resilient" organization.

4 DU teachers

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teachers following a presidential pardon.

Before their release the government however said the detained teachers had been pardoned by President Iajuddin Ahmed following petitions from the detainees' families, a claim the freed teachers later rebutted outright.

DU Teachers' Association (DUTA) General Secretary Prof Anwar, and Social Science Faculty Dean Rashid were detained by the army-led joint forces at midnight of August 24, while Duta Chief Prof Sadrul and Physics Department Chairman Bhowmik surrendered to the court on September 16 and September 18 respectively, following a court's arrest warrant against them.

Asked about the release of the freshly acquitted DU teachers and the student, Education Adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman yesterday said they will be released after today's court verdict.

On August 20, a violent student protest broke out on DU campus following a brawl between an army man and a student during a soccer match on the university playground. The protest later spread to other educational institutions in the city and elsewhere across the country, continuing for a few days resulting in an imposition of a curfew and shutting down of all educational institutions in all major cities.

Following the imposition of the curfew, the military backed administration launched a crackdown on teachers and students detaining some of them and filing cases against the teachers and students of DU and RU.

In the drive, three teachers of RU were detained by the joint forces while five other teachers surrendered to the court following issuance of arrest warrants against them.

PRONOUNCEMENT OF 3DU CASE VERDICT
Metropolitan Magistrate Habibur Rahman Siddiqui took his seat at 10:30am and declared the verdict in presence of the four detained teachers and the student, in a packed courtroom.

The court read out the last portion of the verdict in three minutes and adjourned the court proceedings for 20 minutes.

DU students who were acquitted are Shamsunnahar Hall Unit JCD Acting President Hanjain Chowdhury Lili, Rokeya Hall Unit

JCD President Shahinor Nargis, Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) Central Committee Vice-president Aparna Rani Pal, Rifat Hossain Jiku, Nazrul Islam Russell, Shamsul Kabir Rahat, Mitul, Rokunuzzaman, Kamruzzaman, and Anwar Hossain.

Earlier, the prosecution and the defence completed their arguments and the court recorded statements of 12 prosecution witnesses including the complainant and investigation officer (IO) of the case.

The case was filed against 5,000 of 6,000 unnamed DU students and teachers along with outsiders in connection with the incident that took place at Teacher-Student Centre (TSC), at Institute of Fine Arts, and in Shahbagh area in the capital. Police however pressed charges against only four DU teachers and 15 students on September 9.

The other case against the same teachers and students was filed with the same police station in connection with the violent incidents that had taken place at Nilkhet Police Box and several other places on the campus.

The verdict in that case is scheduled to be delivered today.

In a third case in connection with torching of an army vehicle at Shahbagh intersection in the capital during the DU violence, police on January 7 pressed charges against 25 people comprising DU students and some outsiders, 18 of whom were absolved last night by the government.

A fourth case filed with the same police station in connection with assaulting an army personnel at Shahbagh is currently under investigation, the final report in which was sought by the government last night in an effort to scrap it.

Status

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violating the state of emergency was settled yesterday, with acquittal and pardoning of the accused.

The verdict in another case in connection with violation of EPR against the same persons will be delivered today.

A total of five cases were filed against 5,000 to 6,000 unnamed DU students and teachers in connection with the last August violence on DU campus. Later the numbers were narrowed down to 39 students and four teachers accused in five cases.

Bhawal Nat'l Park

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structures in the protected area, and that's why the government would also look into better enforcement of the rules.

Although a gazette notification had banned setting up of any structures, at least 196 factories and other structures, including poultry and fish farms, schools, and around a hundred thatched houses had been built in the area until 2004.

The 11,252-acre forest was declared a national park in 1982.

In 2004, a committee had decided to immediately acquire 432.5 acres of government land in the core area and recover the illegally occupied parts of the forest.

Meanwhile, the cabinet also decided yesterday that the Green Bank Ordinance 1983 would be amended to expand its operations in urban areas.

Currently, the Green Bank is only allowed to operate in rural areas, which would remain the main focus of the bank under the amended rules.

The government, under the law ministry's advice, also approved the replacement of the word 'election' by 'appointment' in choosing the Green Bank chairperson.

Paban

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harass Khandaker Delwar.

The Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) arrested Paban on October 30 last year in the city's Mohammadpur area. The arrest came following the leads gathered from three of his associates that they got two firearms and nine bullets from Paban.

Paban, the youngest son of Khandakar Delwar Hossain, is accused in at least a dozen criminal cases including drug dealing, land grabbing and extortion.

Food crisis

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5 lakh tons of rice that India offered to sell.

The price, however, could not be fixed, food ministry officials told The Daily Star.

According to a recent Indian announcement, it will not sell the rice for less than \$ 500 a tonne. However, India had offered to sell the 5 lakh tonnes of rice to Bangladesh months before it raised the price tag for the rice.

Oriental Bank

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will sign an agreement with the buyer on February 28.

A five-member committee headed by BB Deputy Governor Murshid Kuli Khan has been formed to evaluate the proposals.

The BB published express of interest for selling the Oriental Bank on August 2 last year and six bidders responded.

Of those, two submitted technical and financial proposals.

The BB will sell 50.1 percent of total shares of the Oriental Bank and minimum price of those shares will be Tk 350 crore.

CA leaves

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The CA will take part in a plenary discussion at the Davos Congress Centre on January 24 on "the quest for peace and stability" along with some key leaders of South and Central Asia.

He will hold meetings with European, American and Asian political and business leaders, as well as with leaders of some fellow Least Developed Countries (LDCs) mainly from Asia.

Bangladesh is currently the chair of the LDCs and Fakhruddin is expected to use this occasion to press for duty-free, quota-free access of LDC products to world markets.

He will also meet international media personalities, and host working lunches and breakfasts for potential investors in Bangladesh.

Ifekhar said Davos is a unique event and not a structured international multilateral conference like the United Nations General Assembly.

The CA in his various discussions and meetings will focus on such issues as institutional reforms for sustainable democracy, the fight against corruption, the requirement of peace to achieve development, climate change and its impact on developing countries and food security.

He will also stress the need for greater market access for LDC products, the importance of education and women's empowerment in social change and on the special responsibility of the developed countries towards those who are less developed.

The CA will also highlight Bangladesh's responsible international role as a major UN peacekeeper in stabilising strife-torn parts of the world, particularly Africa.

He will attend the meetings in Davos on January 24 and 25. He is scheduled to return home on January 26.

Foreign Adviser Ifekhar Ahmed Chowdhury and Press Secretary to the Chief Adviser Syed Fahim Munaim are on the chief adviser's delegation.

They will be joined in Davos by Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to Geneva Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya.

Political parties

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proves that they have committed no crime.

Jatiya Party acting Chairman Anisul Islam Mahmud told The Daily Star, "We are happy with the verdict but it is regrettable that they [the teachers and the student] had to suffer even though they were innocent."

"People know that the teachers and the students of universities are absolutely innocent, which the court verdict proved," Rashed Khan Menon, president of Workers Party of Bangladesh, said.

He said the verdict also proved that the government filed the cases against the teachers and the students because it considered them its opponents, which was wrong.

Mujahidul Islam Selim, general secretary of Communist Party of Bangladesh, said, "We want unconditional release of all teachers and students and our demand has not been fulfilled yet."

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) President Hasanul Haque Inu said the cases filed against the teachers and students were politically motivated and they [teachers and students] were not involved with any crime.

"The verdict was desired by the whole nation and I am also happy with everyone else," advocate Shahdeen Malik told The Daily Star commenting over the acquittal of the detained teachers and students.

"This issue showed a lengthy process of indecision by the government. It could have been fixed much earlier and more wisely," he added.

"The government could have reached a solution through discussion with the teachers and students over the issue without any delay," former adviser Dr Akbar Ali Khan said talking about the incident.

He also observed that in such cases, it is good to find out an immediate peaceful solution and not to let the issue linger.

"The incident which could have been minimised much earlier has been dragged to the present unrest. The students will

not be pacified while three more cases in this regard are still pending with the court," said Prof Muzaffer Ahmed, convenor of Sujon, a civil society initiative to promote good governance.

"The situation seems gloomy," he added.

"The filing of cases against the students was done completely on suspicion and it was unexpected. The government could have dealt with the matter any way other than getting involved with the legal procedure directly," SM Shahjahan, former adviser to a caretaker government, said.

"Immediate actions must be taken so that the issue does not spread further and the prevailing situation becomes normal," he added.

A Dhaka court yesterday acquitted four Dhaka University teachers and 11 students in a case filed in connection with violating Emergency Power Rules (EPR) by instigating students to engage in violent protests on campus in August last year.

The court, however, convicted four absconding students to two years imprisonment in the same case filed with Shahbagh Police Station on August 23, 2007.

The four received presidential mercy along with 10 convicted students of Rajshahi University in the evening yesterday.

Govt talks

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Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda was present on the occasion.

Referring to the progress in the voter listing, the CA said the job will be completed smoothly and fairly, and "There is no doubt about it as a fair electoral roll was the demand of all."

He said the EC has so far registered 2.70 crore people as voters and the work is gradually getting momentum.

Fakhruddin said the EC with the help of army is now carrying out the voter listing work in "char" and remote areas of the country.

He expressed optimism that the Election Commission with the support of the government will complete the task fairly, which is a precondition to holding a fair, transparent, neutral and accept-

Docs promoted

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NICVD and is now at Bangladesh Medical College and Hospital.

But freedom fighter Dr Shahadat Hossain (assistant professor, current charge, Rajshahi Medical College) was denied promotion although there is a quota for the FFs, sources pointed out.

"If the authorities accept results of the examinations held under the disputed committee, then its misdeeds will be legalised," said Dr Shirajul Islam, one of the affected. The PSC can still take a decision in this regard.

Prof Sirajul Haque of cardiology department at the BSMMU was also on this committee as an external examiner. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is investigating allegations of corruption against him.

The present chairman of the commission (PSC) has the power to take decisions regarding the controversial examinations. If it is possible to cancel the viva voce of 27th Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) examinations, then why these should not be cancelled, questioned many of the affected.

When contacted, Health Secretary Zafar Ullah Khan said, "We asked the PSC to review whether the examinations were transparent or not. But the PSC told us that it would not be wise to review it, and we are still in a process of understanding with the PSC."

He went on, "Following complaints, recruitment was halted but we did not ask them (PSC) to stop (publishing results). As PSC has started to publish the results after nine months, we think that they have worked on it."

"PSC took the examinations and if they think that the examinations were fair, then why shall we ask it to cancel that?"

But PSC Chairman Dr Saadat Hussain told this correspondent that they couldn't cancel the examination.

"We cannot cancel the results even if the examinations were disputed. Only if the health ministry says that they don't accept the results, then we could cancel that. But the ministry did not do that though the results were withheld for nine months," he said.

"If the committee concerned had done any irregularities or corruption, it should be taken care by the ACC. We do not review examinations," he said.

Admitting that they had received some complaints, he said, "We will look into specific complaints."

Meanwhile, the High Court (HC) on November 26 had stayed the examination results for promotion to 11 posts of assistant professors of Cardiology for two months

following a writ petition filed by a group of cardiologists. But controversial recruitment process is going on in the ministry for some other departments.

Documents made available to The Daily Star also reveal irregularities concerning the posts of associate professor (surgery).

According to the relevant advertisement, three years' teaching experience as assistant professor or consultant and at least three publications in journals recognised by Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council (BMDC) are essential but eight medical professionals were recruited to the posts ignoring the criteria.

Corruption allegedly took place also in the promotion to 10 posts of professor (surgery). Even changing the definition of teacher as given by the BMDC, many of the candidates took the examination and were recruited.

"As the promotions are lingering for a year, students of different medical colleges are suffering badly," said Khondker Shefayetulla, director, Medical Education and Health Manpower Development of the health directorate.

The health ministry will shortly take a decision in this regard as 30 recommendations of the PSC on medical professionals' promotion recruitment has been pending with the ministry and there are eight recommendations on which writ petitions have been filed with the HC, said a high official of the ministry seeking anonymity.

Hasina

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Chowdhury, managing director of East Coast Trading Pvt Ltd, a private power company.

Hasina's sister Sheikh Rehana and cousin detained former minister Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim are also made accused in the case.

Barrister Shafique Ahmed appeared for Hasina, while Additional Attorney General Mansur Habib for the government.

Govt forms

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The committee, headed by Acting Law Secretary Kazi Habibur Awal, will submit its report to the government within a month.

The other members of the committee are Daily Jangtor Editor Golam Sarwar, Daily Prothom Alo Editor Motiur Rahman, Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul of Sangbadik-Sramik-Karmachari Oikya Parishad, Ruhul Amin Gazi of the parishad, Senior Deputy Chief Information Officer M Joyal Abedin and Deputy Secretary of the information ministry Khurshid Alam (member-secretary).

Families happy

FROM PAGE 1
told The Daily Star yesterday's verdict proved the Dhaka University faculty members were detained for five months for doing nothing wrong.

A Dhaka court yesterday acquitted four DU teachers and 11 students of the charges of breaching the Emergency Power Rule. The court however jailed four absconding students for two years who later in the afternoon were given presidential mercy.

Prof Sadrul Amin, president of DU Teachers' Association (Duta), Prof Anwar Hossain, Duta general secretary, Prof Harun-or-Rashid, dean of Social Sciences Faculty, and Prof Neem Chandra Bhowmik, chairman of physics, electronics and communication engineering department, and student Moniruzzaman Sardar were not released, as verdict in another case against them is due today.

Family members of the five detainees rushed to the Court of Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, Dhaka to meet them after the verdict was delivered.

Prof Ayesha Akhter, wife of Prof Anwar, said: "We're happy with the verdict; it proved that the teachers did not commit any crime."

She expects the verdict in the other case will also be positive. "But for the sake of a congenial atmosphere on the campus, all must be released and the cases be cancelled."

Prof Neem Chandra Bhowmik's wife Manika Bhowmik said justice has won through the verdict. She is also optimistic about today's verdict.

Ishtiaque Rashid and Barnaly Rashid, son and daughter of Prof Harun-or-Rashid, went to meet their father. Ishtiaque said they knew their father was innocent and did not commit any offence. "We were confident that truth will come out and that has happened today," he said.

Tahmina Begum and Nuruzzaman, mother and brother of Moniruzzaman, who arrived in the court from Chandpur, said they want to get him back home.

Pintu

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operations commander of outlawed Harkatul Jihad Al Islami (Hujji), in his recent confessional statement said the attack had been planned at Pintu's Dhanmondi residence.

The sources said the interrogators are also trying to trace if more influential people were also among the masterminds of the orchestrated attack.

The interrogators asked Pintu about the whereabouts of his brother Moulana Tajuddin, who supplied from Pakistan the grenades used in the carnage.

Tajuddin is now hiding abroad and was allegedly involved in Pakistan-based Islamist militant organisation Lashkar-e-Tayaba.

Pintu was interrogated at a Taskforces for Interrogation (TFI) cell since his remand started on Saturday.

Sources said the intelligence officials asked Pintu to surrender his government passport, but he said he has forgotten where it is. The officials are looking into his travels abroad prior to the August 21 attack.

Meanwhile, the interrogators produced Hannan's associate and Hujji activist Hossain Ahmed alias Tamim before Pintu yesterday and crosschecked their information.

The sources said Hannan might also be brought face to face with Pintu soon to verify his statement with Pintu's.

Tamim, now on a four-day remand in the same case, helped Hannan find a house let by his uncle at Badda's Anandanagar in the city.

Rapid Action Battalion arrested him with a grenade in Narsingdi in the last week of October last year.

7th century
FROM PAGE 16
ground salinity has caused much of the ornamental terracotta plaques and the walls of the temples to erode over the years.

The Daily Star correspondent saw that the temples have lost much of their charm of terracotta beauty as the archaeology department turned a blind eye to them. The situation got worse when the locals painted the brickworks of the temple with white lime. The terracotta plaques bear images of religious events but the beauty of the walls, pillars and the rooms is almost all gone.

According to local historians, the temples were built between 700AD and 800AD by the devotees of Shiva for their prayer needs.

Shituran Mohanto, caretaker of the temples, said high salinity, lack of maintenance and protection from the weather have eroded a large number of the terracotta plaques and there has never been any renovation work.

A number of the plaques and bricks on the walls have also been stolen. Fearing further theft, the maintenance committee of the temples encircled the temples with concrete walls.

The archaeology department officials, however, claimed the temples could be restored to their former glory if funds were made available.

Musharraf pledges

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Musharraf acknowledged tensions in Pakistan, which could prompt those who lose the elections to cry foul, but he underlined: "Whatever bugs we have had in the system have been removed".

He also said that the media, which he conceded had been restricted during a six-week state of emergency introduced in November, was free to cover the polls, which had originally been set for January 8.

"I did curb the media when we imposed a state of emergency," he said, adding that now "there is no limit on their freedom".

The Pakistani head of state is on an eight-day tour, which will also take him to France, Switzerland and Britain, aimed at buffing his badly tarnished international credibility following months of political chaos at home.

He was to meet EU foreign policy Javier Solana and NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, as well as address the European Parliament's foreign affairs committee.

Musharraf, in his most important trip abroad since the crisis began, also had trade and defence cooperation talks with Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt.

He is expected to face thorny questions over his commitment to fighting extremism after Bhutto's assassination, as well as more grilling over the elections.

He and Scheffer are likely to focus on what Pakistan is doing to contain Taliban fighters from using the north of his country as a rear base to fuel the insurgency. NATO-led forces are struggling to contain in south Afghanistan.

Nuclear-armed Pakistan is a key

ally in the US "war on terror", but Musharraf has regularly been accused of failing to keep a lid on the Taliban, particularly around the city of Quetta.

Before he arrived, Spanish newspaper El Pais reported that Spain's authorities had warned France, Portugal and Britain of the possibility of attacks during the visit.

Small groups composed principally of Pakistanis were preparing to carry out attacks "imminently," the report cited Spanish intelligence agency sources as saying.

On Saturday, the interior ministry said that Spanish police had smashed a suspected Islamist terror cell, arresting at least 14 people -- 12 of them Pakistanis -- and finding bomb-making equipment in raids in Barcelona.

Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero praised the intelligence services for the swoop but warned against leaping to conclusions about those arrested.

However Spanish media reported Monday that those arrested had been planning suicide attacks on Spanish soil under orders from al-Qaeda in Pakistan.

"Those who gave the order are to be found in Pakistan. They were preparing suicide attacks. Those that came here were ready to commit suicide," the daily El Periodico de Catalunya said, citing sources close to the probe.

Belgian authorities said they do not plan to boost security beyond that which would be in place for a visit by any other head of state or government.

Musharraf is due to fly out to France Monday evening.

Gaza grinds

FROM PAGE 16

station shut, and by Monday morning most bakeries had closed their doors.

"We have enough bread to last one more hour," said Khamis Akia, the owner of one of the last functioning falafel stands in the city.

"There is no electricity, no running water, and no bread," he added. "Tomorrow, I'll sleep late. We are done."

Around the corner a long line of dozens of people filled the sidewalk outside one of the last functioning bakeries in the city.

"I