

2 killed in Baghdad bombing

AFP, Baghdad

A roadside bomb killed at least two people in a mixed neighbourhood of Baghdad yesterday, police said.

Four people were also wounded in the bombing on a major thoroughfare in the northern district of Al-Saleh which was crowded with pedestrians and cars.

Police said the bombers appeared to have targeted civilians, not a military patrol.

EC may hold

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parliamentary poll. Some criteria for registration might be relaxed, if necessary, since we can't provide the parties with adequate time for meeting the criteria," Election Commissioner Brig Gen (ret'd) M Sakhatat Hussain told a group of reporters yesterday in his office.

According to the electoral roadmap announced in July last year, the electoral reforms were supposed to come into force by February this year, requiring political parties to register with the EC by June.

The parties were to get four months to amend their constitutions, elect new committees through national councils, and to audit their annual incomes and expenditures for meeting the proposed criteria for registration.

But the EC could not even begin the process of registration for absence of necessary laws.

With the national election planned for the third week of December, the EC has only a little over two months to complete the job, since it will have to wrap it up before announcing the poll schedule by early November.

Major political parties including Awami League (AL) and BNP are now saying that it will not be possible for them to amend their constitutions and elect new committees through holding national councils within the short time remaining ahead of the planned poll.

They are also opposing some of the prerequisites for registration including one that demands severing of ties with front organisations and overseas chapters.

Against such a backdrop, AL on Tuesday sought a meeting with the CEC to discuss party registration and a date for the stalled third parliamentary poll.

But the EC might begin another round of talks with all political parties instead, the EC sources said adding all the parties that had been invited again.

The CEC however told reporters yesterday that the commission sent a letter to AL asking for an agenda for the meeting the latter had sought.

If the EC holds a new round of talks with the parties, it will be the third of its kind, the first of which was held between September and November last year, and the second in February this year.

US, Poland sign missile shield deal

AFP, Warsaw

Poland and the United States yesterday signed a deal to deploy part of a US missile shield on Polish territory in the face of deep Russian anger.

"This will help us to deal with the new threats of the 21st century, of long-range missile threats from countries like Iran or from North Korea," US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said before she signed the accord with Poland's Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski.

The signing comes amid heightened tensions between the United States and NATO, and Russia over the conflict with pro-Western Georgia.

But Rice again sought to fend off criticism.

"It is defensive and is not aimed at anyone," she said.

"It is nonetheless a system that establishes firmly again, and reaffirms, our cooperation and relationship with Poland. It will deepen our defence cooperation and it will deepen our ability to deal with threats."

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said the deal "achieved the basic aims that mean Poland and the United States are more secure."

Washington plans to base 10 interceptor missiles in Poland plus a radar facility in the neighbouring

Czech Republic between 2011 and 2013.

Both hosts are NATO members since 1999 and the missile shield will complete a system already in place in the United States, Greenland and Britain.

Russia has rejected the US argument that the shield, which was endorsed by all 26 NATO member states earlier this year, is meant to fend off potential missile attacks by what Washington calls "rogue states".

Moscow claims the timing of the deal is further proof the system is aimed at Russia -- a suggestion rejected by Washington.

Moscow had already dubbed the shield a security threat designed to undermine Russia's nuclear deterrent.

"We will be forced to respond to this adequately. The EU and US have been warned," Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said last month as the missile talks moved to a close.

Last week, Russia's General Anatoly Nogovitsyn said Poland was making itself a target "100 percent".

Polish President Lech Kaczynski hit back in a televised address Tuesday, saying his country would not give in to threats.

"No one can dictate to Poland

what it should do. That's in the past," Kaczynski said.

"Our neighbours should now understand that our nation will never give in, nor allow itself to be intimidated," he added.

Kaczynski did not name Russia directly, but his mention of the "past" was a clear reference to Poland's post-World War II decades as a Soviet satellite.

"No one should be afraid of (the shield), if they have good intentions towards us or the rest of the West," Kaczynski said.

Warsaw and Prague have had rocky relations with Moscow since they broke free from the Soviet bloc in 1989, and ties have worsened since they joined NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004.

To try to calm Moscow's ire, Poland has repeatedly offered to allow Russian inspections of the missile facilities.

US and Polish negotiators signed a preliminary deal in Warsaw last Thursday, capping 15 months of negotiations.

Talks had ground on until the United States accepted Poland's demands for extra security guarantees to offset the potential risks of hosting a base -- not specifically from Russia -- including a Patriot missile air-defence system and boosted military ties.

Russia rejects UN Georgia draft

BBC ONLINE, Georgia

Russia has rejected a draft UN Security Council resolution on Georgia, saying it contradicted the terms of last week's ceasefire deal.

The draft text called on Russia to pull back its forces to the positions held before the current conflict.

But Russia says the truce allows its troops to stay in a buffer zone on the Georgia side of South Ossetia's border.

Moscow says it is withdrawing its forces from Georgia. An official in the port of Poti said Russians had left.

Russian forces seized the port on Tuesday. But Adam Middleton, the port director, told the BBC Russian troops blew up a naval vessel and took military equipment before withdrawing on Wednesday.

The conflict broke out on 7 August when Georgia launched an assault to wrest back control of the Moscow-backed breakaway region of South Ossetia, triggering a counter-offensive by Russian troops who advanced beyond South Ossetia into Georgia's heartland. Georgia says its action was in response to continuous provocation.

UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband, who is visiting the region, is to visit a camp for displaced people in Georgia where tens of thousand of people have been made homeless by the recent

conflict.

On Tuesday, Miliband held talks with Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, to update him on Nato's reaction at an emergency meeting of foreign ministers in Brussels which demanded that Russia pull its troops out of Georgia.

The foreign secretary criticised Russia's failure to keep to a prom-

ise to withdraw troops from Georgia.

Meanwhile, Russia's main security service, the FSB, says a Russian officer has been detained accused of spying for Georgia.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Russia risked becoming the "outlaw" of the conflict, in an interview with CBS news on the sidelines of the

Nato emergency meeting.

Russia says President Dmitry Medvedev told President Sarkozy that by Friday, Russian troops would either be sent home, be pulled back to South Ossetia or to a buffer zone along the border.

Russia said it had begun a pull-back on Tuesday as it withdrew 11 military vehicles from the Georgian town of Gori.



Russian soldiers guard a checkpoint on the Gori-Tbilisi road near the village of Khurvaleti yesterday as the speaker of Russia's upper house of parliament, a close Kremlin ally, said that lawmakers were ready to recognise the independence of separatist regions in Georgia, Interfax reported.

One year of DU unrest

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Four teachers and eight students were also arrested and were behind bars for about five months. They, however, were released in the wake of a silent and peaceful student movement. Four Rajshahi University (RU) teachers were also arrested for their alleged involvement in instigating violence on RU campus.

In the wake of the student movement launched to free detained teachers and students, the chief adviser to the caretaker government in a televised address to the nation had said the students and teachers would not be harassed and no more cases would be filed against them.

Two teachers received presidential pardon after they were convicted and sentenced to two years' simple imprisonment in a case. A teacher was also acquitted of the charges.

A court also acquitted four teachers of charges brought against them in another case. The seven students who were released on January 22 and 23 last told The Daily Star that they were tortured in remand. They alleged that the university authorities are

not cooperating with them and not bearing their medical treatment costs.

The case was filed against 25 people but 18 of them were acquitted.

The seven accused students are Deen Islam Angel, a third-year student of the mass communication and journalism department, Deen Islam, a third-year student of accounting department, Zahidul Islam Biplob, who finished his MBA recently, Asaduzzaman Asad, who obtained first class in his masters examination at mathematics department, Rafiqul Islam Sujon, second-year student of Islamic studies department, Rashedul Habib, fourth-year student of Sanskrit department and Abul Hasan, second-year student of Arabic department.

Deen Islam told The Daily Star, "Our academic life is disrupted as we have to appear in court every 15 days. The government withdrew several cases filed against us but only in name as they brought the charges of other cases under one case."

"We asked the VC [vice-chancellor] for help but he said he has nothing to do in this regard,"

said Deen.

Deen said they met the VC yesterday along with leaders of different student organisations.

Prof Anwar Hossain, one of the four teachers who were detained and general secretary of Dhaka University Teachers Association, told The Daily Star, "The detained teachers and students were released after a student movement and the government had promised then that it would not harass teachers and students anymore... it has not kept its promise."

Moreover, the 18 acquitted students were harassed as police went to their homes with warrants and investigation slips.

Hasan Mamun, one of the 18 and president of Jatiyabadi Chhatra Dal DU unit, told The Daily Star that police went to his home in Dashmina upazila in Patakhali with warrants and investigation slip in May. They asked about his whereabouts.

DU Vice-chancellor Prof SMA Faiz told The Daily Star that he would take steps if he found a scope to do something about the matter.

The DU authorities will observe August 23 as "University Black

Day".

DU students yesterday observed August 20, 2007 by bringing out processions and holding rallies on campus.

Different student organisations staged demonstration separately on campus demanding immediate withdrawal of the case filed in connection with the torching of an army vehicle.

Protesting law enforcement agencies' harassment of students during and after the student unrest, Bangladesh Chhatra League brought out a silent procession on campus and held a rally yesterday afternoon.

Jatiyabadi Chhatra Dal also staged demonstrations protesting the harassments. Chhatra Dal leaders demanded withdrawal of the case and urged university authorities to provide treatment costs for the DU students concerned.

Left leaning student organisations including Bangladesh Chhatra Union, Bangladesh Chhatra Federation, Bangladesh Chhatra Maitree, Samajtantrik Chhatra Front also demonstrated on campus demanding the same.

Most graft convicts absconding abroad

FROM PAGE 1

A makeshift tea stall now represents the Gulshan residence of Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, former commerce minister of the four-party alliance government.

One can buy snacks and groceries from the stall set up by a guard of Khasru, who is on the run since the government launched its massive anti-corruption drive in February 2007.

His former cabinet colleague Shajahan Siraj could not even care about his domestic possessions. Khasru took away all the household stuffs through relatives, but ex-forest and environment minister Siraj just vanished from the scene, leaving everything behind under lock and key.

But Harris Chowdhury is undoubtedly the 'smartest' of all fugitives. The political secretary of detained ex-premier Khaleda Zia and BNP joint secretary general fled the country along with all his belongings long before the caretaker government took office on January 12 last year.

He lived up to his tag as the shrewdest player in the Prime Minister's Office, sniffing an imminent danger in the air much ahead of others now on the corruption list and wasting no time in fleeing to the UK.

Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya is the only convicted fugitive former minister from the Awami League (AL) who along with family fled a year ago leaving his two apartments in Baridhara and all the belongings behind. Maya could only take away three cars.

Like Khasru, Siraj, Harris and Maya, many other politicians, ex-ministers and lawmakers disappeared during the ongoing anti-corruption drive against high-profile graft suspects and their family members.

Intriguingly, most of the big fish convicted so far are still absconding and their relatives remain tight-lipped about their whereabouts. Intelligence agencies and their close circles believe most of them have left the country.

Around 130 high-profile individuals have so far been convicted in 105 graft cases by 10 special courts set up at the MP Hotel in National Parliament Complex by the caretaker government.

Of the convicted, 89 individuals or 68 percent were tried in absentia since the anti-graft drive against the big fish was kicked off.

Those convicted among the fugitives could not appoint counsels in their defence, as the law does not permit it.

Khasru is accused in a graft case, while Siraj and Harris are convicted in several others. The fugitives could not appoint their counsels to defend the cases as all of them are absconding.

Lawyers from the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) say the absconding convicted would not be able to file appeals in the High Court as long as they remain fugitive.

The convicted who are absconding include four ex-ministers and one former lawmaker of BNP, one ex-minister and eight ex-MPs of AL and one ex-minister from Jatiya Party.

The BNP ex-ministers and lawmakers are M Morshed Khan, Shajahan Siraj, Ziaul Haque Zia, Shahjahan Omar, and Rashiduzzaman Millat. AL leaders are Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya, Abul Hasanat Abdullah, Sheikh Helal, HBM Iqbal, Haji Selim, Mustafa Rashidi Suja, Makbul Hossain and Mohammad Mohiuddin. Anwar Hossain Manju is the only former minister from Jatiya Party.

Besides these former ministers and lawmakers, many of their spouses and family members are also absconding.

As many as 35 convicted spouses, officers, and relatives of politicians are absconding. Of the politicians, some are in jail and some are on the run.

Ward commissioners of Dhaka City Corporation Monwar Hossain Dipjol and Chowdhury Alam are absconding along with their spouses and family members.

Some businessmen, ex-government officials and their spouses have also evaded arrest. Bashundhara Group Chairman Ahmed Akbar Sobhan alias Shah Alam, his wife and sons are on the run. Orion Group Chairman Obaidul Karim, a convicted businessman, has also gone into hiding.

Besides convicted fugitives, there are many high-profile graft suspects including politicians, government officials and businessmen accused in different cases and are still on the run.

The escape of high-profile graft suspects has put the highly publicised drive into question. Government sources say some fled out of apprehension before the drive began, while some others were given the opportunity to run away.

For example, just before submission of charge sheet in the Gatco-graft case, former finance minister M Saifur Rahman was allowed to go abroad for treatment despite the fact that he would be one of the charge-sheeted accused.

The first list of 50 high-profile graft suspects was made public on February 18, 2007. They were asked to submit their wealth statements to ACC in person. Some of them were arrested while submitting wealth statements and some others were overlooked.

Former BNP lawmaker M Rashiduzzaman Millat along with family submitted wealth statement to ACC on February 20, 2007 and was not arrested. Millat, his wife and their son were convicted in absentia and could not be held.

Though it was repeatedly said the absconding would be brought back, the government had taken no efforts to that end. Sources say the govern-

ment does not bother with the absconding convicted if they do not return on their own.

Meanwhile, a number of investigators of the army-led taskforces told The Daily Star it would be a tremendous help for them in unearthing large-scale corruption and crime if the absconding convicted are brought back.

They say despite having enough clues and scattered information to corruption and crime by the nexus involving Hawa Bhaban and former prime minister Khaleda Zia's office, they could not bring those on papers as some of the nexus members have evaded arrest.

Tanque Rahman and Giasuddin Al Mamun had involvement in large-scale corruption aided by a group of people in Hawa Bhaban and Khaleda's office including Tarique's APS Mia Nuruddin Aju, Khaleda's assignment officer Firoz Mahmud Iqbal and political secretary Harris Chowdhury.

"Had the nexus been arrested or not allowed to escape, it would be much easier to dig out more stories of large-scale corruption by Tanque, Mamun and the nexus," an investigator said asking not to be identified.

DID HARRIS KNOW? Did Harris Chowdhury know earlier about the present government's anti-corruption drive against politicians, ex-ministers and lawmakers?

The question rose following Harris's mysterious exit leaving his palatial house in Gulshan behind and taking almost all stuffs, even utensils, on December 28, 2006, 16 days before the Fakhruddin-led government took charge, according to security guards of neighbouring houses.

Harris has already lost the house on 2-high land, as the public works department has retaken its possession saying he purchased the government house misusing power.

During a recent visit, the house looked just like a deserted palace. Big bushes in his lawn and gardens and fallen leaves on the road through main entrance indicate that none has touched anything for long.

The two-storey splendid building that he developed after purchasing a one-story building from the government during the BNP-Jamaat-led government still shows how expensive it was to build.

Marble tiles and other materials used to decorate the house are very expensive, says a PWD staff who has been tasked with looking after the house.

Caretakers and guards of a neighbouring house told The Daily Star they witnessed furniture and other stuffs being shifted for at least two weeks before he finally left on December 28.

They shifted house stuffs in covered vans for 15 days. We just saw covered vans coming and leaving every day until we came across Harris' house helps, who said they were

shifting elsewhere," a guard said.

"After December 28, Harris' house helps told us they didn't know where their master has gone. Some days later they said he shifted to another flat and then one day they said he is not in the country," the guard added.

"We have also heard that Harris shifted the stuffs to the house of his father-in-law."

The guards say seven to eight house helps including gardeners used to stay in Harris' house till January. All of them left without getting their salary for the month of December.

"Only a gardener was picked up by the joint forces and detained for two to three months. After his release he said the interrogation was about Harris' whereabouts," said another guard.

The guards also commented that Harris might have had some knowledge about the 1/11 changeover and managed to flee 12 to 14 days before the event.

But the government investigators believe he left before the crackdown on high-profile graft suspects started and kept his furniture in a relative's house.

The investigators have so far learned that Harris crossed the border through Sylhet and entered Karimganj in India in February.

They said they have information that Harris is now staying in London. MINISTER'S HOME TURNS TEA STALL

During a visit to Khasru's house, it was found a cup of tea was being sold at Tk 3 there.

"I did not have any work and used to stay idle almost all day long. So I came up with the idea of the tea stall. Now it keeps me busy and gives me an opportunity to earn besides my monthly salary," said Abu Taher, a guard hired from the Arafat Security Guard Company.

Taher and another person from the company were working as guards, though there were some policemen also posted to man the house.

About the former minister's departure, Taher said, "The minister went out with his family on a car even-ning in mid-late year."

Johnny, who was 'manager' of this house, had told Taher that Khasru along with family left for London for his treatment.

"After a few days some relatives visited the house and took away all stuffs except a TV and some government ceiling fans," said Taher, adding Johnny and Bimal, another caretaker of the house, left later.

One day a huge number of police came and sealed the house, he said.

When the former minister lived in the house even a dog couldn't dare walk around it. Now the scenario has turned just upside down, Taher said.

He said another car the ex-minister left behind was taken to his hotel Sabina in Banani from where Taher draws his monthly salary.

A court notice now hangs in the

wall of Khasru's house.

The notice signed by Metropolitan Sessions Judge Md Azizul Haque on September 8, 2006 reads: "The court has rationale to believe that you [Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury] are absconding to evade trial and there is no possibility that might lead to your immediate arrest... You have been directed to appear before this court in the mentioned case within three days after this notice is served."

POLICEMAN MORE AFTER SIRAJ Jahangir Hawader has nothing to do except sitting idle by the road in front of the palatial two-storey Gulshan house of ex-minister Shajahan Siraj.

He was appointed a year ago to look after the house as Siraj disappeared suddenly with his wife and family members.

The building is totally locked and Jahangir has no keys to go inside. He lives in a room built outside the main building.

Siraj, his wife Rabeya Haider and son Rajib Siraj have been convicted on different terms in separate graft cases.

"At first we did not notice that they fled as they had left home in the way they always did. After a few days we realised that something had happened," said a neighbour's guard.

Jahangir had to face police several times. Sometimes the police "re-buked" him while enquiring about the whereabouts of Siraj's family.

"The police insisted that as I work for them, I must know where they live now. But I really don't know where they are. But I believe they are not in Bangladesh."

Even the police have stopped coming for the last five months," he said.

Siraj's daughter who lives in her house in Gulshan appointed Jahangir at Tk 3,500 per month.

"If police or someone else visits the house and leaves any message or any letter arrives, my duty is to pass it to her."

ONE OF MAYA'S APARTMENTS SEALED

Maya has two apartments at Moriom Tower in Baridhara where he used to live along with his wife and two sons.

The tower's security guards say they could not even sense when Maya left the apartment with three cars and leaving all the belongings behind.

The guards also say eight to ten house staffs including driver and house help of Maya also left gradually. The apartment officials said they also have not got different utility bills and service charges since Maya left.

The joint forces have sealed one apartment, while the other is very often visited by Maya's younger son Ronny.

Maya's wife, younger son Rashedul Hossain Chowdhury and daughter-in-law Suborna Chowdhury were acquitted in graft cases filed against them, while his elder son Dipu Chowdhury is convicted in a graft case.

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