

Somali pirates release Saudi supertanker

AFP, Nairobi

Somali pirates said yesterday they had freed a Saudi-owned supertanker, whose capture nearly two months ago wrecked panic in international shipping and spurred the world into tougher anti-piracy action.

The 330-metre Sirius Star, owned by the shipping arm of oil giant Saudi Aramco, was seized far off the east African coast on November 15, in what was the pirates' most daring attack and largest catch to date.

"All our people have now left the Sirius Star. The ship is free, the crew is free," Mohamed Said, one of the leaders of the pirate group, told AFP by telephone from the pirate lair of Harardhere.

"There were last-minute problems but now everything has been finalised."

Sahafi Abdi Aden, speaking from the same town on Somalia's Indian Ocean coast, also said the hijacking was over.

"I am in Harardhere now and the issue of the Sirius Star was resolved peacefully. I cannot go into the details of the agreement but I can say that the ship is free," he told AFP.

"No member of the crew or of the pirates was hurt during this hijacking."

The amount of the ransom paid for the ship's release was not yet known. Pirates had told AFP days after seizing the Sirius Star they wanted 25 million dollars (18 million euros) for its release but the latest reports indicated that the demand had been lowered to around 3.5 million.

The Sirius Star was manufactured in South Korea and deliv-

ered last year. It is believed to be worth around 150 million dollars and its cargo was estimated at the time of the hijacking at 100 million dollars.

The crew of the Sirius Star is made up of 25 people from Britain, Croatia, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines and Poland, where the ship's captain hails from.

Pirates operating off Somalia's coast, in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean, have carried out more than 130

attacks in 2008 alone, turning the region into the world's most dangerous waters.

The capture of the Sirius Star, which is carrying close to a fourth of top world producer Saudi Arabia's daily output, sent shockwaves through the world's shipping industry.

The Gulf of Aden is a key maritime trade route, where thousands of ships bottle-neck into the Red Sea before heading to the Suez canal, linking Europe to Asia.

Strike sparks fuel crisis in India

AFP, New Delhi

Petrol stations in cities across India ran dry yesterday as a strike for better pay by state oil employees entered a third day and talks with the government broke down.

"We had some discussions but we are yet to reach a conclusion," Sarthak Behuria, the chairman of Indian Oil Corporation told reporters after overnight talks with the petroleum minister.

More than 45,000 employees at government-run oil companies halted work Wednesday to press for higher pay.

Petrol stations in many cities put up signs saying they had run out of stock, while motorists formed huge queues outside other filling stations.

Nearly two-thirds of gas stations in New Delhi were without petrol and diesel, and

scores of flights were delayed because of refueling difficulties.

Two oil company employees were reportedly released after being arrested briefly for instigating workers to stop work.

The Press Trust of India said the government was considering calling in the army to replace the striking workers and shift petroleum supplies from oil refineries to pumps.

Another report says, Indian government on Wednesday said it may cut petrol and diesel prices further in "the next 2 to 3 weeks" and also slash cooking gas prices.

"We will try to reduce the prices of petrol and diesel in the next 2-3 weeks," Petroleum Minister Murli Deora told reporters at the All India Congress Committee (AICC) headquarters here.

Asked about the extent of reduction, he said it has still not been decided.

Qaeda operatives

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men died, but according to the Washington Post, which first broke the story, the al-Qaeda operatives were killed in a January 1 missile attack in northern Pakistan.

Local security officials told AFP on January 1 that an unmanned CIA aircraft had fired three missiles in the Karikot area of South Waziristan, killing five suspected militants.

The New Years strike occurred near Karikot in South Waziristan, the Post reported.

The two men were both born in Kenya, according to the State Department's Rewards for Justice website. Al-Kini, born Fahid Mohammed Ally Msalam in Mombasa, was 32. Sweden's birth date is given on the website as either April 1960 or 1969.

The pair died after being struck with 45 kilo (100-pound) Hellfire missiles fired from a pilotless Predator drone operated by the Central Intelligence Agency, the Post reported.

The CIA declined to comment on the strikes, but an official told the Post that the men were killed in a strike on a building being used for explosives training.

"They died preparing new acts of terror," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The two men were also on the FBI's most wanted list for links with the August 1998 bombings of US embassies in East Africa.

Both have been indicted in connection to the bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi for "murder of US nationals outside the United States; conspiracy to murder US nationals outside the United States; and attack on a federal facility resulting in death," according to rewardsforjustice.net.

The State Department website maintains lists of

Baitul Mukarram

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people tried to shout them down. This resulted in scuffles and hurling of shoes.

At this stage, Nuruddin began leading the prayers, and the situation calmed down.

But trouble resumed after the prayers, leaving several people injured witnesses said. Police however said they have no report of injuries in the incident.

Nuruddin took over as acting Khatib following the death of Khatib Obaidul Haque about one and a half years ago. The caretaker government recently appointed Mufti Mohammad Salauddin as Khatib.

Meanwhile, two rival groups siding with the newly appointed khatib and opposing the acting Khatib had assembled in the area since morning yesterday. And this might have dissuaded the new Khatib from coming to the mosque to lead Jum'a prayers.

Nuruddin said he led the prayers as instructed by the mosque authorities.

Experts' views

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up, the ordinances promulgated by the president during the tenure of caretaker government will have to be placed before the parliament for ratification in its first session.

"The first session of the ninth parliament will begin on January 25. If those are not passed in the parliament within 30 days after its session starts, those will become invalid," he said.

Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister barrister Shafique Ahmed yesterday said the legal experts will submit their opinions at the Monday's meeting and a report on their opinions will be placed later at a cabinet meeting for decisions on the ordinances.

Barrister Rafique-ul-Huq, the head of the committee, said he has already prepared his opinion but denied giving details about its contents.

He, however, said the committee members will submit their individual opinions at a meeting at the law ministry at 4:30pm on Monday.

He said in view of Article 58(E) of the Constitution, the caretaker government has no power even to advise the president to promulgate ordinances. In absence of parliament the president can promulgate ordinances in a 'very exceptional situation'.

The committee members include Dr M Zahir, former attorney general advocate Mahmudul Islam and barrister Ajmalul Hossain.

Awami League lawmaker barrister Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh has been given the responsibility to maintain liaison between the committee members, sources said.

current reward offers for wanted persons designated as terrorists by the US government.

The autonomous tribal area of northwest Pakistan has been wracked by violence since hundreds of Taliban and al-Qaeda rebels sought refuge in the region after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan toppled the Taliban regime in late 2001.

Comilla UZ poll candidate, two others killed in road accident

UNB, Comilla

Three people, including a pro-BNP vice-chairman candidate for Comilla Sadar South Upazila Parishad, were killed in a road accident at Matara on the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway yesterday evening.

The dead were identified as vice-chairman candidate Nurul Amin, UP Chairman Nurul Islam and the driver of a CNG-run auto-rickshaw.

Police and witnesses said the accident occurred when a Dhaka-bound Volvo bus of Green Line Services from Chittagong hit the auto-rickshaw on the highway at around 6:00pm.

Nurul Amin along with the UP chairman was going to Noapara village in the auto-rickshaw for campaigning.

Police seized the bus but its driver fled the scene.

Tigers

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tance to the slow bowlers.

Bangladesh were unimpressive in the second Test against Sri Lanka and the preceding one-day series against South Africa but the Tigers have won one one-dayer against New Zealand last October in Mirpur when all seemed lost to the ICL exodus.

The visitors, who beat GPCB National Cricket Academy by 195 runs in the three-day practice match in Bogra two days ago, will have the likes of Hamilton Masakadza, Tatenda Taibu and Raymond Price to bank on but their recent record against the Tigers is very poor.

In the last home series, Bangladesh whitewashed Zimbabwe 5-0 in 2006 before winning 3-1 in Zimbabwe including an exciting one-wicket win in the last game between the two sides. But overall, the visitors have a 18-15 advantage over the Tigers in all one-dayers.

Sri Lanka -- the other team in the tournament -- take on Zimbabwe in the second match of the tournament on January 12.

Hasina

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She recalled the contributions of Awami League to the Language Movement, Liberation War in 1971 and democratic movements in the 90s.

Hasina extended her special thanks to the people of Gopalganj, Bagerhat and Rangpur districts from where she contested the national elections and got elected from three seats.

Earlier, the prime minister paid tribute to the father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by placing wreath at his grave.

After placing wreath, she stood in solemn silence for sometime showing respect to the architect of Bangladesh's independence. A contingent of the three services gave a guard of honour.

The prime minister offered special prayer for the peace of the departed soul of Bangabandhu and also for peace, progress and prosperity of the nation.

Cabinet members, advisers to the prime minister, state ministers, members of the parliament, high civil and military officials and family members and relatives of Sheikh Hasina were, among others, present.

BNP criticises

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terrorism will only contribute to the spread of terrorism, but people expect a responsible role of an experienced politician like the home minister.

"The home minister took recourse to falsehood to cover up the terrorist acts by her party's leaders and workers," the BNP leader said, adding that the government should ensure safety of people's life by taking action against ruling party's criminals.

Qatar may raise salary limit for family visas

PTI, Dubai

Immigrants working in Qatar getting a salary less than USD 1,924, might soon find it difficult to bring their spouses and children here, as authorities in Qatar are looking to increase the minimum monthly salary limit for family visa by more than 50 percent.

To sponsor wives and children a visa applicant must now have to have a minimum salary of 7,000 Qatari riyals or USD 1,924 up from earlier 4,500 Qatari riyals or (USD 1,235), according to media reports.

The increased cost of living in the Gulf state is being blamed for the move, Arabic paper Al Sharq reported.

"Once the decision to raise the salary limit is taken, we are going to straightaway reject the request of an applicant for family visa if his basic salary is less than QR 7,000", a source in the recruitment committee told the newspaper.

"We will be taking all possible steps to guarantee that no family visa applicant gets away with falsifying facts and figures. We are going to be very strict about implementing the rule once it is in force," he said.

In November, the Qatar Central Bank had said soaring rents due to a severe housing shortage was the single largest driver of higher inflation in the Gulf state last year.

JS session

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conducive to the opposition's playing a proper role in parliament. "We hope Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will continue to preach tolerance the way she did at her post-election press conference."

AL on Thursday welcomed the BNP's decision to join parliament.

Speaking at a press briefing at the AL president's Dhanmondi office, the party's Joint General Secretary and LGRD Minister Syed Ashrafur Islam said they hope BNP's role in parliament would help make the house dynamic.

"The number of opposition lawmakers is not important to us. It's their quality that matters most," he added.

2 judges

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The president will appoint two of them as the Appellate Division judges.

Barrister Abdullah-al-Mamun, a counsel for the convicts in Bangabandhu murder case, said as per rules a bench of at least three judges of the Appellate Division is required for hearing the appeals of five condemned prisoners against their convictions handed down by the High Court.

After the two judges are appointed, the bench can be constituted for hearing the appeals as there are already Justice Md Tazazzal Islam and Justice Md Joydul Abedin of the apex court who can hear the matter, he said.

Of the five Appellate Division judges, Chief Justice MM Ruhul Amin and Justice MA Matin had earlier felt embarrassed to hear the case at the HC Division while Justice Mohammad Fazlul Karim had heard the case and delivered judgment at the HC Division, Mamun added.

The appeals against death sentence handed down by the High Court have remained pending in the Supreme Court for more than 15 months because of shortage of judges.

LC (sacked) Syed Farooqur Rahman, LC (ret) Sultan Shahriar Rashid Khan, LC (ret) Muhiuddin Ahmed, Major (ret) AKM Mahiuddin Ahmed (Lancer) and Major (ret) Bazul Huda filed the appeals with the apex court in the last week of October 2007 as per the court order.

Neither the defence nor the state has taken any move to hear the appeals in this period.

A special bench of the Appellate Division comprised of Justice Tazazzal Islam, Justice Md Joydul Abedin and Justice Md Hassan Ameen on September 23, 2007, granted the leaves to appeal filed by the five convicts against their death sentence.

The court also asked them to file regular appeals for hearing by October 30, 2007.

District and Sessions Judge Kazi Golam Rosul awarded death sentence to 15 accused persons on November 8, 1999 and acquitted four accused including Taberuddin Thakur. Another accused Khondker Mostaque had died.

The death reference of the Bangabandhu murder case was then sent to the High Court for disposal.

On April 30, 2001, the third High Court bench of Justice Md Fazlul Karim confirmed capital punishment against 12 and acquitted three others.

ISI hands Mumbai

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India" after studying that evidence. He gave no more details.

On Wednesday, Gilani fired the national security adviser hours after the official told reporters the sole surviving Mumbai attacker was a Pakistani citizen something that Islamabad had previously been unwilling to acknowledge.

Local media reported President Asif Ali Zardari was not informed of the decision, intensifying earlier media speculation of a split between the country's top two leaders.

Analysts say there is confusion at times over who is in charge in Pakistan.

Upon taking office Zardari promised to support reducing the presidency's powers, but there has been little visible progress on that front. Zardari, who also heads the ruling Pakistan People's Party, is believed to be stronger than Gilani, even though the prime minister is technically the chief executive of the government.

Both officials have sought to downplay reports they are feuding.

"There is no misunderstanding," Gilani insisted to reporters Friday, while denying reports that Zardari was displeased with the decision to

UZ polls

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and order during the election.

Army personnel will fan out to different destinations from January 18, and will remain deployed as strike force until January 24.

Besides, the home ministry has already decided to deploy over 500,000 security personnel across the country to ensure law and order during the election, which will be the first poll under the newly elected government.

As per the ministry's security plan, members of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), Coast Guard, Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and Armed Police Battalion will operate as mobile and strike forces across the country from January 16.

The EC will hold a meeting on law and order tomorrow to finalise details of security measures for holding a free, fair and credible election, sources said.

Israel defies UN call

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nearly 800 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces, according to medics in Gaza.

Gaza medics say children account for 230 of the victims and 92 women have also been killed.

Pressure on the two sides increased with a late night UN Security Council resolution which demanded an "immediate, durable" ceasefire leading to the "full withdrawal" of Israeli forces from Gaza.

Fourteen of the 15 council members voted in favour. The United States, Israel's main ally, abstained but refrained from vetoing the resolution agreed after lengthy negotiations between Arab and Western foreign ministers.

The moderate Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, whose power is limited to the West Bank, called the UN move an "important step," but stressed that applying it was key.

The response from Olmert however was dismissive, calling it "impractical" in the face of continued rocket attacks by Hamas.

Israel launched its war against the Islamists on December 27 aiming to end rocket attacks in southern Israel and the smuggling of weapons into Gaza from Egypt.

"Israel has never agreed for any outside influence to decide on its right to defend its citizens," Olmert said in a statement.

"The IDF (Israel Defence Forces) will continue to operate in order to defend the citizens of Israel and will carry out the task it was given for the operation," said the statement, which was released as his security cabinet met.

A senior official later confirmed the security cabinet had decided to continue the offensive in Gaza despite the security council resolution.

"The ministers reiterated Israel's full right to defend its citizens to which end the IDF will continue its operations," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

A Hamas official in Beirut, Raafat Morra, said his group was also rejecting the UN resolution, as "it is not in the best interest of the Palestinian people."

Israel staged more than 50 airstrikes in Gaza which Palestinian emergency services said killed 12 civilians,

sack the adviser, Mahmood Ali Durrani.

A Zardari spokesman said Thursday that the two were "on the same page" and it was Gilani's prerogative to fire Durrani.

The Mumbai attackers are suspected to be members of Lashkar-e-Taiba a militant group created by Pakistani intelligence agencies in the 1980s to fight Indian rule in Kashmir, a Himalayan region claimed by both countries and the trigger for two of their three wars.

Some analysts say the group maintains ties to Pakistani intelligence and that the government cannot act too aggressively against it as a result.

In recent weeks, several US envoys have visited India and Pakistan to defuse tensions between the nuclear-armed neighbours and press Islamabad to take action against extremists on its soil.

Biden is travelling to Pakistan in his capacity as a US senator. He is being accompanied by US Sen. Lindsey Graham. Biden takes office as vice president on Jan. 20, but has not yet resigned his Senate seat.

Essentials' prices to be brought down in a month says minister

UNB, Dhaka

Commerce Minister Col (ret) Faruk Khan on Wednesday said the prices of essentials will be brought down within the buying capacity of the common people by a month.

"The prices of essentials will be brought down within a month and people will be able to buy rice at less than Tk 20 per kg," Faruk told reporters while visiting Karwan Bazaar kitchen market.

About the much-talked-about business syndicate, he said, "Yes, there is a syndicate and there will be a crackdown on it to keep the prices within the purchasing capacity of the commoners."

He, however, said the government does not want to control the market, as it is a democratic country. "But there is a syndicate that controls the prices of essentials and the government wants to break it," the commerce minister said.

21,000 AL men

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put emphasis on training up police as members of the law enforcement agency were incapable of carrying out proper investigation. Public prosecutor should be made independent and efficient, he said.

The LGRD minister, however, did not say if the government would take any initiative to train up police force and public prosecutor.

He urged his political archrival BNP to stop lying about AL that it (AL) said it would slash the price of rice to Tk 10 a kg and distribute fertilizer free of cost.

"BNP is lying. Nowhere in our manifesto it is written that people could buy rice at Tk 10 and get fertilizer for free," said the AL leader asking the BNP leaders to stop lying.

Earlier, BNP leaders Salauddin Quader Chowdhury and MK Anwar told reporters that they would like to see whether AL could feed people rice at Tk 10 per kg, provide fertilizer free of cost and employment to one member of each family.

They made the remarks soon after the new government headed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was sworn in at Bangabhaban on January 6.

He said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina would talk to BNP about their offer of picking up the deputy speaker of the parliament from the opposition.

Referring to Wednesday's decision of the cabinet to cut diesel price and provide fertilizer subsidy, the LGRD Minister said the AL-led government would turn the country self-sufficient in food production.

Sheikh Hasina's cabinet

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who let her down terribly and brought her government and her party to the dust. If her point is correct then there is hardly any value to be placed on experience.

In terms of reputation for honesty, which, admittedly, is crucial given the history of most ministers of the past government, her choices score very high. There is one particular selection that worries us, someone we have written about in the past, and through whose ministry huge amounts are likely to be spent during the tenure of this government. Without prejudging his future performance we say that the independent media will keep him, and the likes of him, under special scrutiny as we support the PM to make determined moves to remove corruption.

In choosing the cabinet a very important question that needs to be asked is of efficiency. Can these ministers deliver? Can they manage and run their ministries? The answer must wait. We must allow sufficient time for them to perform before we can justifiably say who is and who is not efficient. However, it is a point that must be made earlier on that while sincerity and honesty are of course very important, for the goals set out in the Awami League's manifesto to be achieved cabinet members will have to be highly efficient.

Generally, Bangladeshis are bad managers. Or politicians are no exception. Public representatives love to respond positively whenever demands are made for new schools, bridges, health centres and the like without much thoughts on the budget, more importantly about their operating costs. All such demands are justified and necessary. But the question is do we have the money to build them, and do so now? Even if we do, is there no better use of that scarce resource? These are questions that all public representatives, especially ministers, must remember every time they face the public. What must be realised today is that core to good governance is good financial practice, the starting point of which is "you must cut your coat according to your cloth" and not vice versa.

One of the ironies of the developing world is that poorer a country the higher is the percentage of waste. Corruption is not the sole reason for fund misuse. Wastage is a very important component of it, which is caused even by well-meaning and honest leaders. Preventing wastage in project implementation will serve both to prevent inefficiency and give greater value for our money. Here again comes the question of good management practices that saves money, ensures efficiency, guards against corruption and wastage, and allows the government to do more with the same limited resources. Will the new ministers be able to bring such management discipline into their work?

One idea that can perhaps be looked into is immediate, short and compact course on management for most of the

ministers, especially one that helps them keep track of project expenditure. The initiative could come from finance minister who will be most benefited if all ministries become more proficient in managing their projects and keeping more transparent and organised books of account. The suggestion may seem trivial but could make a most vital difference in the ultimate success of this government.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has gambled heavily on her two first-time women ministers. We can justly be proud that we are the first country in Saarc and perhaps among the very few in the world who have given both the home and foreign portfolios to women at the same time. It is another example of Sheikh Hasina's attempt to build a bold, new and gender sensitive face of Bangladesh's government.

Compared to previous foreign ministers Dr Dipu Moni, trained both in medicine and law, will definitely present a far more sophisticated face of our country than before. She is well-educated, well-read and is known to be a quick learner with a high degree of common sense. Her obvious lack of experience in foreign affairs (Well which of our previous foreign ministers had any experience?) can well be made up for if she keeps an open mind and takes wise counsel from the pool of former foreign secretaries and ambassadors that AL is replete with. Given her quick mind and especially her modesty, she will, we are certain, be a fast learner and become adept in her task in no time. While we are willing to repose our confidence in her ability, we must warn her that the tasks she has been entrusted with are an extremely challenging one, especially in the present complex world and in our neighbourhood. There is no scope for her to underestimate the difficulties, the complexities and the relentless pressure that she will face. She needs also to remember that she will be constantly under media focus, especially because of her portfolio, and her slightest misstep will have repercussions far beyond our borders, repairing which may be far more difficult than would logically seem.

Home Minister Sahara Khatun is well known for her honesty, integrity