

Thousands flee Swat as Pak troops kill 50

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan said yesterday 50 Islamist militants were killed in an overnight ground and air offensive in the crisis-hit Swat valley, where around 20,000 civilians have fled pitched battles in a week.

Another 15 militants were killed in Pakistani operations across the Swat valley on Tuesday, bringing to 50 the number of Islamists killed since overnight, officials said.

"At least 15 militants were killed in operations in different areas of the Swat valley on Tuesday," a security official told AFP on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to release the information to the media.

Until two years ago, Swat was a jewel in the crown of Pakistani tourism, frequented by foreign and local holidaymakers escaping to the mountains for skiing in winter or more refreshing climes in the punishing heat of summer.

But the northwest region descended into chaos after radical cleric Maulana Fazlullah embarked on a terrifying campaign to enforce a Taliban-style Sharia law, prompting thousands of people to flee and suffocating day-to-day life.

Pakistan, under massive Western pressure to clamp down on extremists, last week stepped up an offensive in an attempt to flush out the militants and wrest back control of Swat, which locals say has fallen to the insurgents.

On Tuesday, the Pakistan army said it attacked militant hideouts in the Khawazakela district of Swat, two days after another 16 militants were killed.

Priyanka

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Later, Hasina and Priyanka spent some time exchanging greetings in a cordial and family environment.

Prime minister's younger sister Sheikh Rehana and State Minister for Home Affairs Tajmim Ahmed Sobel Taj were present.

PM asks

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when she was informed that no steps have been taken to date to help out the families in peril.

The prime minister directed the departments concerned to look for khas lands where the affected families can be rehabilitated.

Authorities were also asked to find out the reasons why several villages subsided following the operation of the coalmine in Dinajpur. She also assured the families of rehabilitating them, saying: "The government will take appropriate steps for your welfare."

PM's Adviser Towfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, Environment Minister Mustafizur Rahman and State Minister for Power and Energy Shamsul Haque Tuku were present on the occasion.

Myanmar migrants

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wooden boats without engines," said Rahmat, 43.

"During the journey about 20 people among us died because there was no food and water. We performed prayers in the boat for them before we threw the bodies into the sea... Almost every day someone would die."

Fishermen found their boat, which was held together with ropes, and handed the migrants over to the Indonesian navy.

The allegations against the Thai security forces surfaced last month when boatloads of Rohingyas started turning up in Indian and Indonesian waters.

Thailand has vehemently denied the allegations but the latest batch of migrants to have washed up on Sumatra tell identical stories.

"They said Thai authorities towed them out to sea and set them adrift," Sutardi said.

They showed scars from beatings they said they had received at the hands of the Thais, he said.

Migrants found off Sumatra on January 7 also bore scars which they said had been inflicted with wooden sticks and rifle butts.

A doctor at the hospital in East Aceh said 56 migrants were being treated for "severe dehydration and trauma."

Sutardi said the Bengali-speaking migrants claimed they had left their homes in Myanmar's western Arakan state because they were being forced to embrace Buddhism.

They said the military authorities in the mainly Buddhist country chopped their fingers off if they tried to pray.

52 killed

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and hangar for light aircraft was seized by troops advancing on the village of Thirivilavu in Mullaitivu. No aircraft were found, but search operations were underway, a military official added.

The Tigers were believed to have five Czech-built Zlin-143 aircraft, smuggled onto the island in pieces and re-assembled. The guerrillas last launched an air attack in early September, when they bombed a military base.

Sri Lanka's government pulled out of a Norwegian-brokered truce a year ago, and a subsequent offensive has seen the LTTE's territory shrink from 18,000 square kilometres (7,000 square miles) to an area of less than 300 square kilometres.

The government says the rebels are using at least 120,000 civilians as human shields, while the United Nations calculates a quarter of a million people are trapped by the fighting.

Two senior US senators urged Sri Lanka's government and the rebels to safeguard civilians and ease aid access to the north.

Democrat John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Richard Lugar, the panel's top Republican, said they were "greatly concerned about the deteriorating humanitarian situation."

"We urge the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to immediately take all necessary steps to protect civilians and facilitate humanitarian access," the senators said in a joint statement.

Sri Lanka does not allow independent media free access to the island's conflict zone or to the camps housing those displaced civilians who have managed to flee the fighting.

The UN, foreign governments and international and local rights groups have raised concerns over the safety of civilians while doctors said a shell attack killed nine civilians at a hospital inside the conflict zone on Monday.

The army in a statement accused the Tigers of arming Tamil civilians to take a final stand against the military.

"Tigers as the last resort want to show the world that civilians are behind their losing battle," it said.

Transit, Tifa

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American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh (AmCham) at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel yesterday.

The assistant secretary of the United States and the foreign minister of India will visit Bangladesh soon. Whether any agreement will be signed or not on the transit and the TIFA during their visits cannot be said at the moment, he told the journalists in response to queries.

Bangladesh has excellent relationship with the USA and India, the minister also said.

Replying to a query raised by former AmCham President Aftabul Islam, Faruq Khan said all the relevant aspects like inclusion of Nepal and Bhutan in the transit would be taken into consideration during the talks with Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee.

He also said, "The transit proposal was mooted in 1978 when General Ziaur Rahman was president. An agreement was signed between the then Indian Commerce Minister Pranab Mukherjee and former state minister for commerce of Bangladesh Chowdhury Tanbir Ahmed Siddiqui."

According to the agreement, the proposal for establishing rail, road and waterways between the two countries was made. Both AL and BNP governments came to power after 1978, accorded it.

The last BNP government approved the agreement on March, 2006, Faruq Khan said. AmCham President Syed Ershad Ahmed presided over the function while US Ambassador James F Moriarty was present as the special guest.

Hatirjheel project

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conducted feasibility study of the project, said at the meeting the BGMEA Bhaban is a major obstacle to the project.

The main objectives of the project include retention of rainwater to reduce waterlogging, flood protection, wastewater disposal to improve environment of the area, construction of roads around Hatirjheel to improve communication and reduce traffic congestion, and walkway around it.

The meeting was attended by top officials of the ministry, Rajuk chairman and Wasa representative.

Half of ordinances

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"Matters regarding finance, elections, and law and order were given priority in preparing the short list of the ordinances to be ratified," the law minister said.

He said ordinances promulgated by the caretaker government without having jurisdiction, will not be ratified by the parliament.

The special committee has yet to consent to ratification of the Upazila Parishad Ordinance, since the immediate past caretaker government had no jurisdiction to determine the functioning of the local government system.

Only the parliament is empowered by the constitution to determine the functions of local government institutions.

The immediate past caretaker government nonetheless repealed the Upazila Parishad Act passed by a past parliament in 1998, and promulgated a whole new ordinance regarding the upazila level local government's functioning.

The 15-member special parliamentary committee formed to scrutinise the ordinances, in its second meeting yesterday heard expert opinions before picking the 44 ordinances for ratification.

The experts earlier had recommended that 50 ordinances be ratified by the parliament.

In yesterday's meeting held in the parliament building, the eminent jurists said according to the article 58 (D) of the constitution the caretaker government was supposed to carry out only routine governmental work, and to do everything to ensure holding of a free and fair parliamentary election.

The caretaker government did not have any jurisdiction to do anything else, let alone taking any policymaking decision, they added.

"Most of the ordinances can't be ratified according to the article 58 (D) of the constitution," said Mahmudul Islam, a former attorney general also a constitutional expert, who attended the meeting on special invitation, to give expert opinion.

"Echoing him," another eminent jurist Dr M Zahir, who earlier had worked as an expert to prepare the previous short list of 50 ordinances, recommended for ratification, said "The number might be lesser now, as we are scrutinising more carefully."

The eminent jurists also questioned the caretaker government's jurisdiction to impose taxes without a parliament's approval.

The immediate past caretaker government imposed taxes twice during its interim regime, and made national budgets the same number of times.

The taxes imposed by the caretaker government through ordinances, were already realised too, the experts said adding that at this stage it is not possible to go back to the period prior to the imposition of the taxes.

"We have no alternative but to accept the reality. We suggested the special committee to insert a preamble in the bill to ratify the finance related ordinances, saying, we don't support it, but we are compelled to ratify it," Dr Zahir said.

About the experts' opinions, the law minister said, "They gave their opinions and we heard them."

CCC backtracks

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to the CCC asking to stop the project following a direction from the prime minister, CCC officials said they were yet to receive such instruction.

Prof Rawshan, also a former student of Aparana Charan school, said primarily the ground floor would be set up to run the activities of the two schools at a cost of Tk 1 crore.

The CCC also has plans to set up a girls' college on the upper floors of the building, she added.

CCC Executive Engineer Anwar Hossain said primarily they are going to submit a proposal for a six-storey building to the CDA within a day or two with two basement floors and all necessary facilities for the two schools.

He did not say anything about the foundation but said more floors would be added in future.

The new design include parking spaces in the basements, auditorium, assembly hall, library, IT village and cultural centre on the ground floor and classrooms, teachers' common rooms, academic offices, indoor sport centres for students, canteens and common rooms on other floors.

People concerned are sceptical about CCC's move and interpret it to be a strategy to fool the common people.

Say bye to Jamaat

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their work on the day.

The central teams have asked field level leaders to submit by February 23 written statements with suggestions for revamping the party, said insiders.

The team for Dhaka Division led by Joint Secretary General of the Party Abdullah Al Noman yesterday held a meeting with leaders of the party's upazila units in Sherpur.

Contacted last night, President of Belkuchi upazila (Sirajganj) BNP Jamaluddin said "It will be better for our party if it does not continue relations with Jamaat."

Stressing coordination between younger and older leaders for new committees, he said, "Dedicated and honest leaders should get importance in the reconstitution process."

Echoing his views, Shahjadpur upazila BNP President Hossain Shahid Mahmud said, "In the last election, Jamaat activists did not do anything for BNP candidates, and they worked only for their party nominees."

He said, "We have to go for a new policy on Jamaat as fresh voters have taken the war criminal issue emotionally. So, it will be risky for us to continue ties with Jamaat."

Asked about reorganisation of the party, he said young, educated and dynamic leaders should be given scope to lead the party in the coming days.

Kamarkhandh upazila BNP President Badiuzzaman Ferdous told this correspondent, "All committees of BNP should be reconstituted and good persons should be elected leaders."

He also said, "Voters aged 18 to 25 took a strong stance against Jamaat in the last elections. So, we should not continue our relations with it."

President of a upazila BNP unit in Sherpur said, "Party high-ups must have to take a strong stance against corrupt leaders and war criminals, otherwise we have to suffer more in future."

Seeking anonymity, he said, "No controversial leader should be included in the standing committee and executive committee of the party since they have destroyed its image."

According to the party announcement, the team for Khulna Division comprised of Selima Rahman and Mohammad Shahjahan will sit today with upazila level leaders from Magura district.

Star, Aktel

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programme styled "English In Schools (EIS)" at a simple ceremony at city's Spectra Convention Centre today.

Under the programme, The Daily Star and Aktel will distribute three copies of The Daily Star each to around 1,000 schools, equal number of boys and girls' school.

Textbook crisis

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(Feb 7) to resolve the textbook crisis across the country.

"A total of 76 lakh textbooks from class VI to X will come to the markets on February 7 under the third phase. I hope, the existing textbooks crisis will end very soon," Nahid said.

He said secondary level students could not get their textbooks in time, as printing of the books was not finished within the time frame.

National Curriculum and Textbooks Board (NCTB) affiliated printing agencies and publishers published 54 types of textbooks for secondary level students last month under first and second phases. But the amount of textbooks was not adequate against the demands, sources said.

Leaders of Bangladesh Publishers and Book Sellers' Association (BPBSA) said they placed a proposal before the minister for allowing them to print the textbooks openly without royalty using newsprint papers.

"It is difficult to sell the textbooks using white print papers as per ream white print paper is now Tk 1200 in the markets. Earlier, it was possible because NCTB sold per ream white print papers at Tk 606 in subsidy," a leader of BPBSA told The Daily Star.

"How can we sell the textbooks as per the NCTB fixed price using white print papers after buying it Tk 1200 per ream from the markets?" he raised the question.

However, officials at the education ministry and NCTB said a syndicate of publishers and booksellers is behind creating the artificial textbook crisis in the markets.

"The syndicate has created the crisis so that students are bound to buy guidebooks from the markets perceiving the textbook crisis," a top official at ministry told The Daily Star.

The officers at the ministry also said NCTB monitoring team has failed to keep close watch on the total process, which is another cause for creating the textbook crisis.

Tragedy written

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Mandir, one of the oldest buildings at Shankharibazar.

"We could not yet start preserving the structures declared heritage sites long before now," said Abdul Khaleque, director general of the government's archaeology department.

"No doubt we need to conserve Shankharibazar. But unfortunately we don't have the funds required to conserve the entire area," he said adding that a collective community approach would help the situation improve.

According to historians, parts of the 300-year-old city quarters were built during the Mughal period. Most of the residents were craftsmen who make 'Shankha' (bangles made of seashells).

Currently, a few hundred families live at 142 houses lining a 600-foot narrow alley at Shankharibazar.

Over the years, unplanned renovation has diminished the heritage value of the houses that boast a distinct architectural style.

Heritage activists say Shankharibazar warrants immediate conservation. The government must come up with comprehensive plans so that the entire area remains as it is, and the locals too are out of danger.

Meanwhile, the growing value of land at Shankharibazar appears too tempting for the house owners not to make way for high-rises.

Biswajit Dutta Bhulu, caretaker of a temple-cum-house at holding No. 14, one of the biggest structures in the area, plans to build a multi-storey there.

He has already started bringing down the rear por-

tion of the building. "This property belongs to Lord Krishna. I'm only a caretaker. I cannot sell it but I can surely develop it," said Biswajit.

Replying to a query, he said he does not want his temple to be part of any heritage site, and if necessary, he is ready to go to the court.

Besides being used as a temple, the building houses many families.

"The structure is so old that it may collapse any time and cause a tragedy like that in 2004," he said.

Experts think the government's decision to declare Shankharibazar a heritage site in fact marks the beginning of conservation process. Now the owners should not demolish the houses; instead they should help the authorities preserve those.

Architect Taimur Alam, who has been working on the ancient site, said, "Some owners want to knock down the old structures. If they do so, it will be a huge blow to the conservation move."

Shafiqul Alam, former director general of the archaeology department, said the French government had once proposed to help conserve the houses and the community at Shankharibazar. But they backed away fearing legal tangles stemming from multi-ownership of the structures.

"Most of the houses have multiple owners. While some agree to let their houses preserved properly, the others stay bitterly opposed to the idea. Ultimately, we will have to face legal battles if we are to go ahead with the conservation plans," Shafiqul added.

Some houses are owned by as many as 50 people.

3 confessed graft

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The report was prepared on the five-month experience of the commission as several graft-accused, mostly government officials and their wives, confessed to amassing ill-gotten wealth.

The report contains observations, perspectives, background, and main goals behind formation of Tac and some recommendations.

It observes that soon after joining the civil service officials begin receiving percentages which is well-known at the departments concerned as PC, distributed at a fixed rate in different levels.

"Beginning from tender, contractors are used to offer fixed rates of PC to certain officials until the final bill is received on completion of works," the report says.

It adds: "The volume of assets they [government officials] amassed illegally is beyond imagination. Some of the government high-ups along with their wives faced the commission. According to their statements, they became corrupt either at the very beginning of service life or sometimes later out of provocation."

"A former chief engineer said he did not initially realise PC but was later compelled to do so and continued the practice until he resigned."

Over the years many government officials develop their own logic 'legalising' their ill practices.

The report reads, "Realising PC is not held as an illegal act as engineers have to do extra planning and supervision."

"The statements of the clemency seekers make it clear that there is hardly any official who don't take illegal benefits. Some also talked of facing consequences for denying illegal benefits."

The report also describes the amounts of ill-gotten money amassed by clemency seekers. An RDH chief engineer confessed to having ill-gotten wealth worth Tk 15 crore. A chief engineer from Sylhet City Corporation and his wife confessed to amassing wealth worth Tk 4.15 crore. An executive engineer from BIWTA amassed Tk 1.17 crore. A sub registrar had Tk 1 crore, an additional chief engineer of RDH Tk 1 crore, among others.

The confession statistics show how widespread corruption has been at the public service institutions. DELAYED INVESTIGATION

"A madrasa principal was caught red-handed while drawing Tk 40,500 by forging a cheque and served one year in jail. Ten years into the incident, probe into the incident has yet to be completed. The teacher has now become empty-handed fighting legal battle," the report says.

The teacher got an opportunity to get him cleared of the charge after police forwarded the case to ACC and when Tac was formed.

"In a case a neighbour made an allegation against a former senior engineer. The investigator without scrutinising the allegation impartially conducted investigation against the engineer, his wife and son-in-law, and daughter's husband," the report says.

It also suggests ensuring accountability and transparency at public service institutions and making the high-ups responsible for their part in cases of corruption and also for graft committed by their subordinate officials.

It says investigation agencies should be more careful as the practice of harassing people for false reason exists in the society.

Adaptation

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seminar on "Road to Copenhagen—Seen from Bangladesh" at a city hotel yesterday.

State Minister for Environment and Forest Mustafizur Rahman, who also spoke at the seminar, asked for resources from development partners to integrate climate change initiatives in the country's mainstream development process.

The Danish minister said, "I have learnt that in Bangladesh up to 40 percent of the investment in development and infrastructure is likely to be affected by climate change." The Danish government committed additional initial funds for the new Strategy and Action Plan for Management of Climate Change for Bangladesh, she added.

"Denmark is contributing 120 million taka or 10 million Kroner in addition to the more than two billion taka that we already commit each year here in Bangladesh," Hedegaar said.

Mustafizur also sought support of development partners, including Denmark, Sweden and the UK, to Bangladesh's proposal for setting up an international adaptation research and training centre.

The seminar was held ahead of Denmark's hosting of Copenhagen Conference of Parties (COP) 15 of UNFCCC.

The state minister said Bangladesh prefers a shared vision regarding all the four elements of the Bali Action Plan namely mitigation, adaptation, technology transfer and finance.

"Bangladesh deems it fitting in her unique socio-economic and environmental context to achieve this shared vision which ensures her food, water, energy and livelihood security," he said in a statement read out by the environment secretary.

Mustafizur noted that people of Bangladesh do not believe in isolated development. "International cooperation and development walk hand in hand," he said.

He mentioned that the government has already setup Climate Change Fund and received the DFID support as pledged in the London Conference on Climate Change.

The state minister urged Denmark and other development partners to support Bangladesh's initiatives to face the challenges posed by climate change and her quest for a cleaner and greener planet.

Environment Secretary AHM Rezaul Kabir, Danish Ambassador Einer Jensen and Dr Atiq Rahman, director of Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, were on the panelists at the seminar. Foreign diplomats, environment experts and officials attended it.