

Red Cross sends food aid to Sri Lanka war zone

AP, Colombo

Sri Lankan naval boats accompanied an emergency Red Cross shipment of food aid for tens of thousands of civilians trapped in the north-eastern war zone Wednesday as the Tamil Tiger rebels once again appealed for a halt to the war and a new round of peacetalks.

Government forces pledging to end the quarter-century civil war have pushed the rebels to the brink of defeat in recent weeks, seizing their strongholds across the north and trapping them in a 100-square kilometre strip of land along the coast.

Aid groups estimate about 200,000 civilians are stuck in heavy fighting, though the government says the number is less than 100,000. The government has denied accusations it shelled areas filled with civilians, while the rebels denied reports they shot at

families trying to escape.

Rebel political chief Balasingham Nadesan accused the government of creating a humanitarian crisis in the area, and denied UN accusations that it was recruiting child soldiers and holding the local civilian population as human shields against the government offensive.

The United Nations said earlier this week that those caught in the fighting were facing severe shortages of food, medicine and clean water. An increasing number have fallen ill.

The Red Cross said it was sending 30 tons of dry rations to the civilians in the north. Aid workers say a minimum of 2,500 tons a month is required to feed the civilians trapped there.

Navy spokesman Capt DKP Dassanayake said naval boats were accompanying the Red Cross vessel.



PHOTO: AFP

This handout picture released by the Sri Lankan Ministry yesterday, shows troops carrying dismantled artillery guns captured from Tamil Tiger guerrillas in Wanni in the island's northeast on February 16. Government forces yesterday have rejected calls for a truce with the Tigers who are cornered in a narrow strip of land in the north-east.

India offers help in Lanka evacuation

BBC ONLINE, New Delhi

India has said it ready to help in the evacuation of tens of thousands of civilians caught up in the fighting in Sri Lanka.

Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee also told parliament the Tamil Tiger rebels had "done much damage" to the Tamil community and should lay down arms.

The UN and Red Cross have expressed deep concern for the trapped civilians.

The Sri Lankan navy has escorted a new convoy of food to the area but it is only a fraction of what is needed.

Meanwhile, the defence ministry says the army is continuing to take rebel areas in the shrinking zone the Tigers control and the government has again ruled out a ceasefire.

Pro-rebel sources yesterday accused the air force of killing 100 civilians in a cluster bomb attack.

No independent journalists can reach the conflict zone so claims by either side cannot be independently verified.

In his statement to the Indian parliament, Mukherjee said the plight of about 70,000 trapped civilians was a "serious source of concern to us".

He said India was "actively engaged to prevent a further deterioration of humanitarian conditions" and had sent relief supplies to civilians.

Mukherjee added, "The government of India is ready to facilitate the evacuation of civilians trapped in the area of conflict, working with the government of Sri Lanka and the International Committee of the Red Cross, who would

take responsibility for the security, screening and rehabilitation."

He said India continued to back "a negotiated political settlement" but that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) remained "a proscribed organisation in India [that] has done much damage to the Tamil community".

His comments sparked anger among MPs of two regional parties from India's Tamil Nadu state and the uproar forced two adjournments.

There are about 62m Tamils in the state and they have close links to Sri Lanka.

In the 1980s India sent troops to enforce a peace deal but they ended up fighting the Tigers and were withdrawn in 1990.

TALIBAN PEACE DEAL

Pakistan emanating 'contradictory' messages: Hillary

PTI, Washington

There are "contradictory communications" emanating from Islamabad about what it intends to achieve in the peace deal with Taliban in the restive Swat valley, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said.

"I want to get the whole picture of what it is they're attempting to achieve," Hillary said in Tokyo during her first official visit after taking over as the Secretary of State.

She said US will "thoroughly study the deal, before reacting to it, but expressed concern over the situation in Pakistan."

"The entire situation in Pakistan is a concern," Hillary told the ABC news in an interview, her first as the Secretary of State to a TV news channel.

Hillary, who is currently

travelling to Tokyo, however, said she would like to thoroughly study the peace deal between Pakistan and the Taliban militants before making any comments.

"Obviously, we believe that the activity by the extremist elements in Pakistan poses a direct threat to the Government of Pakistan, as well as to the security of the US, Afghanistan and a number of other nations," she said, according to a State Department transcript of the interview.

"So before I comment on what its meaning might be, I want to be sure that we have as good an understanding of both the Pakistan Government's intention and the actual agreed-upon language. And that I don't have at this time, so I want to wait until we can provide that," she said.

Break law, get punished

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The clashes however got ample time to die down as Hasina, also the organisational leader of BCL, reached the venue late, at 12:50pm, although she had been scheduled to be there at 11:00am.

The area of the stage where she sat was surrounded by bulletproof glass, and the same was the case with the lectern from where she delivered her speech.

The prime minister opened the event by hoisting the national and her party flags, followed by releasing of balloons and white pigeons into the air.

BCL President Mahmud Hasan Ripon, and General Secretary Mahfuzul Haider Chowdhury Roton also spoke at the event attended by many former BCL presidents and general secretaries, senior AL leaders, and ministers, along with a large number of current BCL activists.

HASINA BLASTS THE MEDIA The prime minister also embarked on a tirade against the media saying a section of it has started criticising the AL-led coalition government too soon, as it assumed power only 37 to 38 days ago, adding they are raising a raucous even for minor infractions.

She said the media should compare neutrally and honestly the present situation with the post-election situation in 2001. After the 2001 election, she alleged, the winning BNP-Jamaat alliance carried out killings, grabbed lands, and occupied student dorms.

During the last AL rule, one journalist was harassed, whereas 14 journalists were killed during the BNP-led four-party alliance regime, she compared.

"Their pens were not as sharp back then, as they are now," she complained adding, "Why this discrimination I don't understand."

"I don't have an Aladin's lamp," she went on, "Don't think we don't know at all the reason for the discrimination! In fact they are taking out on us, their own frustrations of failing to implement the minus two formula."

She said her ruling coalition will keep on working for the nation and for the wellbeing of

the people, not for the interest of any individual.

Referring to media reports that BCL does not listen to her instructions, she said if Chhatra League did not listen to her instructions, then BNP's student wing Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal would not be able to celebrate its founding anniversary in Dhaka University's Modhu's Canteen by cutting a cake just two days after the general election.

She said there was no freedom of expression and no democracy in the country during the emergency caretaker rule of the last two years.

As AL came to power through a movement and the December 29, 2008 parliamentary election, the people are now free and independent, she claimed.

She also said, "Freedom is not a license...everyone must respect the law."

She blamed BNP-Jamaat's last five-year tenure for the spread of terrorism, thuggery, corruption, and extortion.

She said the immediate past caretaker government tried to clear some of the mess at its nascent stage, but did not succeed because it got too busy with its 'minus-two formula'.

She however mentioned of a flawless voter list and a fair election, as successes of the caretaker government.

The prime minister said there are some people who always want to join the ruling party, adding, "But I don't want to give any chance to those opportunists, as they will make trouble after joining...we can't take responsibility of the actions of those elements. We don't need any new force, as we have the people's mandate."

She urged her student followers to prepare themselves as worthy citizens, acquiring knowledge through scientific education, which she said are prerequisites for building up a digital Bangladesh by 2021, pledged by their party Awami League.

Hasina also announced that the national conference of BCL will be held soon, where genuine students will become future leaders of the student organisation through an election.

12pc Social Safety Net

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The study conducted by an expert team under National Food Policy Capacity Strengthening Programme of FAO said this noting that very poor people without social connection or affinity are unlikely to have access to such benefits.

Some 14.5 percent beneficiaries have used the channel of giving bribe to make their access to the SSN programmes and two-thirds of the beneficiaries managed their access through the above channels. Only one-third was selected purely on the basis of poverty, the study found.

Another important channel to get the SSN benefits is belonging to the vote bank of an influential member or chairman to qualify for prioritization. About one-fifth of the current beneficiaries reportedly received benefit through this channel.

"The beneficiaries are of course poor but they are poor with good linkage", Dr M Maniruzzaman said. The study however reported that despite many constraints and quite high degree of nepotism, the local governments are managing the SSN reasonably well with limited overlapping, low degree of leakage and misuse of the fund.

The SSN has been defined as actions, policies and programmes that attempted to reduce poverty through direct transfer of resources to the poor.

It intends to or at least helps ensure a minimum level of income for the extreme poor, who are unlikely to benefit much from the economic growth.

During the last two decades, the Government of Bangladesh introduced as many as 27 SSN programmes and the most important ones are VGD, VGF, FFW/CFW, Old Age Allowance, Widow or Distressed Women Allowance,

Disability Allowance and Distressed Freedom Fighters' Allowance.

Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper targeted reaching about four million beneficiaries in 2008-09 year through four major long-term SSN programmes like VGD, Old Age Allowance, Widow Allowance and Disability Allowance, and some 13 million through short-term programmes like VGF, FFW, CFW, TR, GR and 100 days employment support.

The study report recommended further emphasis be given on geographical targeting and higher prioritization on the most deprived and vulnerable people like extreme poor, disabled or old aged men and women not having support from the family, mothers of orphaned and abandoned children.

Maniruzzaman also emphasized the need for capacity building of the existing institutions saying, ways and means should be identified to improve local governance along with enhancing the involvement of local communities in the SSN management.

Muhith vows stern action

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government) was the first to identify them and take action against them. This time more stringent action would be taken," he said.

The finance minister was talking to journalists after a meeting with the Bangladesh Bank (BB) authorities.

The one and a half hour meeting was attended by BB Governor Salehuddin Ahmed, deputy governors Nazrul Huda, Ziaul Hasan Siddiqui and Murshid Kuli Khan and other high officials.

He visited the central bank for the first time after the Awami League-led grand alliance came to power.

Later, Muhith told reporters, "In 1982, I first detected 10 loan defaulters and took punitive action against them. This time I have got mandate from a huge number of people's representa-

tives. Naturally, more emphasis will be given on the drive against loan defaulters."

Asked about likely non-ratification of the Bank Company Law (Amendment) Ordinance promulgated during the tenure of immediate past caretaker government, he said, "You know Bangladesh better. You are well informed how pressure groups work here."

Pressure groups exist in the political process, and the government has to work accepting this reality, he added.

The ordinance seeks to limit the number and tenure of directors on the boards of private banks.

Muhith said a law would be made based on the ordinance with slight amendments.

He also said the central bank has demanded a separate pay scale. It has also sent recommendations in this regard to the Pay

Commission.

"I personally feel that not only Bangladesh Bank, Biman, Shipping Corporation and Bapex, education sector also should have separate pay scale. Otherwise, it is difficult to retain quality staff. But at the same time, excess staff should be cut."

Muhith mentioned that in the past there had been mismatch of information on foreign direct investment (FDI). And the immediate past caretaker government had taken a decision that all concerned would get the information regarding FDI provided by the central bank.

Earlier on his arrival at the BB, the AL-backed trade union welcomed Muhith chanting slogans.

He expressed dissatisfaction at this, saying "I have come here as finance minister."

Ziaul Haq arrested, sent to jail

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immigration officials at Zia International Airport (ZIA), was arrested in the capital early yesterday.

Sources said members of Rab-4 and intelligence agencies arrested him at his relative's house at Mohammadpur Geneva Camp at about 4:00am and produced him before Special Judge's Court of Yasmin Anwar who sent him to jail after a brief hearing in the afternoon.

Ziaul Haq, former state minister for LGRD and Cooperatives, had been accused in eight cases and sentenced to 31 years' imprisonment in three cases. He went into hiding soon after the immediate past caretaker government assumed power.

Rab officials said they arrested Zia acting on a tip-off and later handed him over to Mohammadpur police.

He was first produced before the special judge's court and then before the Speedy Trial Tribunal No-6 that also ordered to send him to jail.

During the hearing, Zia denied all allegations against him and said all the cases filed against him were false and baseless.

The former minister claimed that he neither amassed wealth illegally nor was involved in any misappropriation.

CASES AND CONVICTION A special court sentenced Ziaul Haq to 13 years' imprisonment in a case filed by the

Anti-corruption Commission on charge of amassing wealth illegally.

A court sentenced him to 10 years in prison in a case filed by the Motijheel police on charges of forgery and another court awarded him eight years in jail in a tax evasion case filed by the National Board of Revenue.

Sources said the trial of a corruption case also filed by the ACC against him remains pending.

Besides, three extortion cases were filed against him in Laxmipur and another for misappropriating wheat meant for government relief.

The courts delivered the verdicts in his absence and three arrest warrants were issued against him.

Pakistanis rally for peace in Swat valley

Britain, US ponder over Taliban peace deal

AP, Mingora

A hardline cleric led hundreds of supporters in a peace march in Pakistan's Swat valley yesterday aimed at convincing Taliban militants to lay down their weapons under a pact with the government.

Nato and Britain raised concerns about the deal, which imposes Islamic law and suspends a military offensive in the one-time tourist haven that is now largely under militant control. Nato, which has 55,000 troops across the border in Afghanistan, warned the deal risked giving extremists a "safe haven."

But the US reacted cautiously, with the State Department saying it was still trying to understand Pakistan's strategy.

The regional government in Pakistan's northwest struck the deal Monday with Sufi Muhammad, an aging pro-Taliban cleric who is father-in-law to Swat Taliban leader Maulana Fazlullah. Muhammad agreed to talk to Fazlullah in return for the pledge to introduce Islamic law in the valley, where militants have routed the police, beheaded political opponents and burned scores of schools for girls.

Muhammad and his supporters, carrying black and

white flags representing the Taliban and peace, marched through Swat's main city of Mingora as jubilant residents chanted "God is great! We want peace!"

Fighting between security forces and militants has killed hundreds of people in Swat over the past year, while up to a third of the valley's 1.5 million people have fled. While many Swat residents are desperate for calm, critics warned the deal could embolden militants.

The truce "is certainly reason for concern," Nato spokesman James Appathurai said Tuesday in Brussels. "We should all be concerned by a situation in which extremists would have a safe haven."

A statement from the British High Commission in Islamabad noted, "Previous peace deals have not provided a comprehensive and long-term solution to Swat's problems."

"We need to be confident that they will end violence not create space for further violence," it said.

Pakistani officials insist the deal is not a concession, but rather that it addresses the long-standing demands of residents in Swat and surrounding areas for a more efficient justice system.

The main changes involve already existing regulations

that were never enforced, for instance, allowing religious scholars to advise judges, officials said. There are no publicized plans to ban girls from schooling, as hardline Taliban would want.

"We will not introduce the Taliban system here," Bashir Bilour, a senior provincial government leader, said yesterday. "This is a system about justice. It is for producing swift justice."

Federal Information Minister Sherry Rehman has said President Asif Ali Zardari would not sign off on the agreement "until peace is restored in the region." The Swat Taliban, meanwhile, have said they will stop fighting once Islamic law is in place and are already observing a cease-fire.

When pressed by reporters at the State Department on Tuesday spokesman Gordon Duguid said the US was seeking a "fuller explanation" from Pakistan.

A similar deal in Swat last year collapsed in a few months and was blamed for giving insurgents time to regroup.

Some 2,000 militants are believed to operate in the valley and in defiance of some 10,000 paramilitary and army troops have already set up their own courts, meting out punishments in line with an exceptionally harsh brand of Islamic law.



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of a cleric Soori Mohammad gather as they march during a peace rally on the streets of Mingora in the troubled Swat valley yesterday. Around 15,000 people marched for peace in Pakistan's Swat valley led by Mohammad, leader of the Sharia movement, who signed a deal to enforce Islamic law in the troubled area, witnesses and police said.

Taliban blow up 2 Pak girls' schools

AFP, Khar

Suspected Taliban fighters blew up two girls' schools yesterday while eight militants were killed in clashes with the military in northwest Pakistan, an official said.

The two primary schools were detonated in the Nawagai and Salarzai areas of Bajaur, where the Pakistani military has waged a massive offensive designed to clear the area of extremist Islamists.

Militants have destroyed 30 schools, most of them for girls, in different areas of Bajaur since August 2008, Khan said.

Khan said Pakistani government troops, backed by helicopter gunships, killed eight militants in battles with extremist rebels.

Strike halts normal life in Manipur

PT, Imphal

Normal life was brought to a standstill and over 50 vehicles were damaged at various places during the 48-hour Manipur bandh called to protest the killing of a Sub-Divisional Officer and his two staff members by suspected hill-based militants, official reports said.

Supporters of the bandh, called by a local action committee and supported by several major social organisations, damaged vehicles at Sagolband, Kakwa, Yumnam Leikai and many other places for defying it, the reports said.

They said supporters of the bandh blocked the road at many places in Imphal and greater Imphal areas and set afire vehicle tyres at major roads here.

Panic spreads

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insecurity in the public mind. "Whatever the crime statistics are, my observation is that perceptively the sense of insecurity has increased a bit," says M Shahjahan, former inspector general of police (IGP).

"Crimes like mugging, hijacking and robbery have increased, while activities of the ogyan and malom parties (dope gangs) have created panic among the people," adds Shahjahan, who is also a former adviser to the caretaker government.

Five days after the government assumed power, criminals on January 12 fled with about Tk 3 lakh in broad daylight from a client at the IFIC Bank's Dhammondi branch.

Locals caught one of the criminals and turned him in to the police and Rab with his mobile phone. Both the agencies assured the victim of recovering the money within a few hours as they had got one criminal with cellphone.

Both the agencies immediately asked reporters not to run the news to help them net the muggers. But the other muggers are still at large and the money hasn't been recovered.

The law-enforcers later told the victims it is difficult to recover the money as the muggers switched off their cellphones.

The victim was further told that the law-enforcers were busy with "bigger crimes" and did not have enough time to pay for a "petty" incident.

Sources however say a source of Detective Branch (DB) was involved in the incident and that is why the police are not much interested in the case.

According to police crime ratings, killing is a much bigger offence than mugging. But there are many instances that the law-enforcement agencies could not make any convincing progress in the "bigger crimes".

"Though the government is repeatedly saying that they are taking proper measures to maintain law and order, they should examine the reasons

behind the deteriorating situation and combat crime with an iron hand," says Sultana Kamal.

Former IGP Shahjahan said, "The number of reports on crime in the police stations is less than the real incidents as many victims don't go to the police. They believe they would not get any remedy and rather might be harassed again."

It is very urgent to restore confidence of the people in police," he said.

He added criminals always work through a network, which becomes more active under the political governments as they consider this atmosphere in their favour.

"The criminals always search for a guardian who has control over the police. A nexus is established comprising criminals, a section of police and politicians," he observed.

"Steps should be taken against the guardians of the criminals to abolish the criminals' networks or the nexus."

Meanwhile, some police officials say they are considering the present situation as a transitional period because of probable transfer and posting as all the new governments do so.

Some of them express fear of politicisation in their department in the name of transfer, posting and promotion.

"I don't know my next destination, so it's better to go slow to understand the changed situation," says an officer-in-charge of a police station in the capital.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner Naim Ahmed told The Daily Star they have beefed up security measures including installation of check posts, police patrol and special drives.

Home Minister Sahara Khatun on Friday at DMP Headquarters told journalists there is no reluctance among the police and the force is working sincerely.

But the patrol of police and Rab and their presence on the roads and crime scenes are apparently less compared to the time before the December 29 national polls.