

PM focused more

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The prime minister said a neutral probe committee was formed yesterday ensuring representation of the army, air force, navy, police and Rab.

The new committee was formed as neutrality of the previous one headed by the home minister was questioned.

Hasina blasted the remarks that Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia made during discussions on the obituary motion.

Referring to her meeting with army officers in Dhaka cantonment earlier in the day, she said the opposition lawmakers were echoing some of the views aired there.

Participating in the obituary discussions, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia came down hard on the government's strategies to resolve the crisis.

She again termed the general amnesty a mistake, and said the prime minister's talks with the BDR mutineers 'in the name of ending the revolt was not right'.

Hasina rebutted the criticisms from her opposite number.

In a veiled reference to local BNP men, she said they had brought out processions in Hazaribagh and other areas surrounding Pilkhana to encourage the killers. They chanted slogans like "BDR-Janata Bhai Bhai (BDR-people are brothers)."

"Just when the mutineers were about to lay down their arms, they were told by some

quarters not to surrender," she continued.

"I want to know...who had arranged speedboats to help the mutineers flee... who gave them dresses to change and who brought a grey truck inside the BDR compound?"

She said since the investigation is on, she would not say much.

Mentioning coups and counter-coups in the military since 1975, she said, "It's so unfortunate that our army officers come under vicious attacks all too often and get killed for someone else's lust for power and ambition. Why they have to endure so much pain."

"As many as 565 air force officers were hanged in one incident alone in 1977."

About concerns over unprotected border in the wake of crisis in the border force, she told the House that all border areas were well protected now.

The prime minister announced that her government will give Tk 10 lakh to each of the victims' families. Besides, they will be given Tk 5 lakh more by the army.

Hasina said children of the slain army officials will be able to study at the cadet colleges or other institutions for free.

About the process of trial, Hasina said Lalbagh police have filed a case, and the Criminal Investigation Department is working on it. Some 646 BDR personnel are now in police custody.

She outright rejected the allegation that the government

had appointed rebel BDR member Deputy Assistant Director (DAD) Touhid Alam as director general of the paramilitary force.

She said, "Touhid has already been arrested. He is now in police custody."

The prime minister said her government's timely measures saved lives of army officials and their family members who had been taken hostage.

Israel vows retaliation for Gaza rocket fire

AFP, Jerusalem

Outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert vowed yesterday to hit back "severely" if militants in the Islamist Hamas-run Gaza Strip continue to fire rockets into Israel.

"If the rocket fire from Gaza continues, we will hit back severely, so much so that the terrorist organisations will understand that Israel is not ready to resign itself to this," Olmert said at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting.

"At the end of the week, 11 rockets were fired against southern Israel," he said. "Defence Minister Ehud Barak will give directions so that Israeli forces bring calm to southern Israel."

He spoke a day after seven rockets fired from Gaza landed in Israel without causing casualties although one smashed into an empty school, and a day before an international conference on rebuilding Gaza is to be held in Egypt.

President Shimon Peres told visiting Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre that the billions of dollars expected to be pledged to the Palestinians for rebuilding Gaza by world powers at the Egyptian conference should be given to the Western-backed Palestinian Authority, not Hamas.

Peres "detailed how the smuggling of weapons from Iran into the Gaza Strip has been renewed, and he requested that Europe emphasise that money for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip be directed to the Palestinian Authority and the bodies of the United Nations in order to best help improve the lives of Palestinian citizens," said a statement from his office.

"President Peres cautioned that in the past, a great deal of European money has been wasted in vain and diverted to supporting Palestinian terror activities," it said.

By-election

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"prevailing situation in the country".

According to a fax from the EC, the EC fixed March 12 for the submission of nomination papers for polls to the reserved seats for women in Parliament and March 15 for their scrutiny. The deadline for withdrawal of candidature is 2:00pm March 19.

The EC re-fixed the last date for filing nomination papers for the parliamentary by-elections for March 9 and March 11 for their scrutiny. The deadline for withdrawal of candidatures is March 17.

The parliamentary seats fell vacant as Prime Minister and Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina vacated Rangpur-6 and Bagerhat-1, former prime minister and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia vacated Bogra-6 and Bogra-7 and Jatiya Party Chairman HM Ershad vacated Rangpur-3 and Kurigram-2 after winning all three constituencies they were contesting in the December 29 elections.

Awami League leader Zillur Rahman vacated the other seat (Kishoreganj-6) after he was elected president of Bangladesh.

Replying to a question, Sohul said election to Dhaka City Corporation would not be held on the planned date due to the prevailing situation in the country.

The Dead

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23. LT COL BADRUL
22. LT COL ENAYETUL HAQ
21. MAJ HOSSAIN SOHEL SHAHNEWAZ
20. MAJ SYED MOHAMMAD IDRIS IQBAL
19. MAJ MAHBUB
18. MAJ MOKBUL
17. MAJ MOSHARRAF
16. MAJ MOSADDEK
15. MAJ MOAZZEM
14. MAJ SALEH
13. MAJ MASHIUR
12. MAJ RAFIQ
11. MAJ HAYDAR
10. MAJ KHALID
9. MAJ NOKIB
8. MAJ RABI
7. MAJ MOSHARRAF
6. CAPT MASUD
5. CAPTAIN MAJHARUL HAIDER RUBEL
4. SUBEDER ABUL KASHEM MAJUMDER
3. AMJAD ALI
2. TAREK AZIZ
1. HRIDOY MIA
THE REST 33 BODIES WERE YET TO BE IDENTIFIED

PM talks with army officers

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The prime minister heard each and everyone of the officers with patience. She sought their suggestions and empathised with their emotional loss, saying she could feel their pain as every time she visited the Banani graveyard, she also prayed for 17 souls of her near and dear ones who lost their lives during the assassination of Bangabandhu in 1975.

Some officers suggested that the army be given the task of a "rebel hunt operation" to track and arrest the mutineers efficiently. Some others however cautioned about such a plan as it could lead to high-handedness in some cases and there were chances of such an effort becoming futile. Nevertheless, the prime minister agreed to the idea.

Sources present inside the conference say some officers told the premier they were not too happy with the way the BDR mutiny was handled and they thought it could have ended earlier by mobilising the army quickly.

Hasina then asked each of them what they think she should have done, and they came forward with their suggestions. The officers added her speech delivered on Wednesday at 2:00pm, five hours after the carnage began, could have been delivered earlier to calm down the mutineers.

They added the general amnesty declared by the PM to the mutineers to bring the situation under control should have been conditional. She could have said that the

amnesty would be given if they did not kill officers.

Some officers suggested that each of the families of the slain officers given a high compensation package of Tk 1 crore with a flat or plot. Some others suggested that a more pragmatic approach would be awarding pensions to each of the families of the victims as per the ranks of the officers. This would provide long-term benefit, they said.

As Bangladesh Rifles' (BDR) image and moral have been shattered, it should be restructured, they said, adding BDR may be disbanded and restructured under a new name like "Bangladesh Border Guards".

If sufficient manpower cannot be provided for the new force, it may be formed in line with Rab as a composite force comprising army, navy, air force and the police. They suggested that the PM make an organogram and make it functional quickly as the border needs to be guarded quickly. The PM agreed saying that the details would be worked out later.

The army officers felt aggrieved by the electronic media coverage, especially dealing with the Operation Dal-Bhaat under the Fakhruddin Ahmed-led caretaker government.

They said some people in different talk-shows discussed the matter in such a way that the entire army is a corrupt force. The officers said when people spoke at talk-shows, they should come up with specific and solid information before making such com-

ments as a wrong comment hurts the image of the institution.

A credible enquiry is needed so that in future other governments cannot question it. It should be participated by different groups of people to ensure neutrality.

The officers also felt aggrieved by anti-army statements made by lawmakers in parliament. "We are a force serving the nation. If a body like parliament blasts a government organ like the army, it damages the whole institution," said an officer to the PM.

The officers also expressed their opinion that the army should be kept out of politics. Neither the Awami League, nor BNP should drag army into politics, they said.

They added transfer and promotion within the army should not be politically interfered with and left for handling professionally.

The PM responded to each of the points and questions raised at the conference.

"Everyone returned from the conference with the feeling that since the premier has heard all of their points, there were hopes that she would take actions. However, they also understand not all the problems can be solved overnight," says a source.

Army chief Moeen U Ahmed thanked the prime minister in the end for her patient hearing.

Among her cabinet colleagues, only Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury accompanied Hasina at the conference.

3-day nat'l mourning ends

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officers at their headquarters in Pilkhana ended yesterday.

The national flag was kept half-mast at all government, semi-government, autonomous and non-government organisation premises for the third consecutive day. Special prayers had been offered at religious gatherings across the country for the salvation of the departed souls.

The government earlier announced the three-day national mourning from Friday. Different political, cultural, social and human rights organisations organised milad mehfils and special prayers at mosques, public gatherings, mourning rallies and discussion meetings at the different places.

People from all walks of life, cultural activists, teachers, writers and members of the civil society gathered at the Central Shaheed Minar yesterday to pay homage to the deceased military personnel.

The gathering organised by Sammilito Sangskritik Jote under the slogan "Shokahoto jaati shonghoto aaj gonotontor dhara" pledged to keep away from conspiracy against the nation and uphold the spirit of democracy. A one-minute silence had been observed symbolising reverence for the deceased. The gathering represented the

sheer grief and condolences to the bereaved families.

Former adviser to a caretaker government Sultana Kamal, cultural activist Ramendu Majumder, president of Group Theatre M Hamid, its general secretary Jhuna Chowdhury, Hasan Aref, singer Fakir Alamgir, president of Sammilito Sangskritik Jote Nasiruddin Yusuf Bachchu, and its general secretary Golam Kuddus were present on the occasion.

In his speech Golam Kuddus said the incident at BDR headquarters was planned and was not a spontaneous outburst.

The evening ended with the lighting of hundreds of candles as a symbol of torching all conspiracy with fire. They demanded bringing all the killers to the book.

A gayebana namaz-e-janaza was held at the Supreme Court (SC) yard yesterday afternoon in memory of the army officials and their family members killed in the BDR mayhem.

Judges of the appellate and high court divisions of the SC including Chief Justice MC Ruhul Amin, SC lawyers, Attorney General Mahbub Alam and Additional Attorney General M Enayetur Rahim, and SCBA Secretary Nurul Islam Sujon attended the prayers among others.

Over 1,500 BDR men back

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with instructions to come back to the headquarters when summoned. Only 24 BDR jawans were allowed to join work yesterday.

Talking to The Daily Star, a number of BDR jawans, who returned to the BDR headquarters in plain clothes, claimed that they left their uniforms in or around the headquarters before fleeing in plain clothes on Wednesday and Thursday.

They appeared to be very worried about their future and feared many innocent jawans could become victims if the enquiry is not conducted impartially. A number of them had their family members with them. They also looked anxious.

Those in uniform were asked to report at Gate-4 near Jigatola while the rest at Abahani ground in Dhanmondi. All of the BDR men in plain clothes at Abahani ground could not be listed as reported back yesterday; they were asked to come again this morning.

Around 500 BDR men reported back to the BDR headquarters with their uniforms on.

Talking to The Daily Star, the BDR jawans in uniform claimed that most of them had fled just after the mutiny broke out on Wednesday. Some of them were also on leave that day.

With his uniform on, Selim Mollah, a BDR jawan who was on duty at the office of the killed BDR director general, said, "I fled when I saw a group running and firing. I fled before they could catch me."

He said, "When the shooting started, BDR men on duty

near the boundary walls and entrances fled immediately."

BDR jawan Reaz, in plain clothes, said, "I was forced to stand guard inside the headquarters compound while many others were also made to stand guard at gun point."

Riaz fled the Pilkhana headquarters around 3:00pm Thursday.

BDR jawan Prabir, who fled Thursday morning, said, "Had we been involved in any criminal activities we would not have dared to report back in plain clothes."

The home ministry, in a press note, also said actions will be taken against those who fail to report back to their stations within the stipulated time.

COUNTRYWIDE REPORT, SURRENDER AND ARREST

Our Comilla correspondent reports: Rab arrested Kowser Ali, a BDR jawan, early Sunday when he was trying to get away on a bus at Tiprabazar on Dhaka-Chittagong Highway.

Meanwhile, Rab arrested BDR jawan Mohibul in Faridpur during his attempt to flee by a bus Saturday night. He was handed over to Faridpur police, said Maj Qutubur Rahman Sarkar, deputy commander of Rab-8.

Our staff correspondent in Rajshahi reports: At least 42 BDR soldiers reported to Rajshahi sector headquarters and three battalion headquarters in Rajshahi and Naogaon.

In Naogaon, 22 BDR men reported back. The rest reported to the Rajshahi sector and battalion headquarters, said Tarikul Islam, assistant commissioner of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police.

Our staff correspondent in Sylhet reports: Fourteen BDR

The SCBA will arrange a milad mehil and condolence meeting at its auditorium Tuesday afternoon.

Our Barisal Correspondent reports: Barisal Sangskritik Sangathan Samannaya Parishad organised a public gathering at Birshreshtha Mohiuddin Jahangir Road and brought out a condolence rally demanding exemplary punishment of the killers.

Leaders of the organisation called for united efforts of all to overcome this crucial period.

Our Sylhet Corporation reports: Sylhet City Corporation arranged a doa mehil. Mayor, divisional commissioner, metropolitan police commissioner and other officials of the administration, Rab, police and others joined the programme.

Swadhinata Chikitsak Parishad, Sylhet subsection also arranged a milad and doa mehil at the Osmani Medical College mosque after the Zohr prayers. District and city units of BNP organised a milad mehil after Asr prayers at the adjoining mosque of the shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA).

Meanwhile, city and district Awami League and Khelafat Majlish organised separate milad mehfils for the salvation of the departed souls.

Heated debate

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attack of the treasury and opposition lawmakers' against each other.

The speaker tabled the written questions and answers of question-answer session yesterday and adjourned other things scheduled in the order of the day. Piloting the obituary reference, Speaker Abdul Hamid proposed a short discussion with participation only of Leader of the House Sheikh Hasina and Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia.

The speaker gave the floor to Khaleda Zia to say something on obituary motion. But, Khaleda Zia, who appeared for the second time in the ninth parliament yesterday, demanded the speaker allow other lawmakers to speak first on the motion.

Following Khaleda's demand, the speaker allowed other lawmakers to join the discussion.

However, Khaleda later blamed the speaker for allowing the discussion to go on.

Referring to the speech of BNP lawmaker Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, Awami League (AL) lawmaker Tofail Ahmed said, "The way he laughed and mocked in the House, their [the deceased people's] departed souls would be hurt. People were also dissatisfied."

"Who has benefited from today's discussion?" Tofail said.

None of the previous parliaments witnessed such a long discussion on obituary motion. Usually a handful of senior lawmakers take part in the brief discussion on obituary motion to pay tribute to those for whom the motion was placed.

The speaker had interrupted opposition lawmaker Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury for making a statement against another lawmaker since the speaker would not allow the lawmaker to defend his position during the obituary motion.

The August 15, 1975, killing of Bangabandhu family, jail killing on November 3, 1975, killing of army officials in court martial during the regime of Ziaur Rahman, the August 21, 2004, grenade attack on an AL rally and the August 17, 2005, countrywide bomb blasts were raised among other issues during the discussion.

The opposition lawmakers criticised the government steps taken to handle the BDR crisis. They accused the government of going soft on mutineers while treasury bench lawmakers defended the government moves.

"It is unfortunate," an AL lawmaker said during the unscheduled discussion. He questioned whether the army senior officials who were brutally killed were respected at all in the discussion.

Army called

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the absconding rebels.

"They [BDR rebels] must be tracked down," Hasina told the Jatiya Sangsad.

Following the government notice, verbal messages had already been conveyed to the cantonments across the country to prepare the forces for the operation, said sources in the armed forces division.

The forces were preparing themselves so that they could reach their destinations by today morning, the sources added.

The operation will continue until its goal is achieved," said a mid-ranking army official wishing anonymity.

"The army will help the law enforcement agencies to arrest the absconding rebels and recover firearms," Deputy Secretary (political) of home ministry, Javed Ahmed told The Daily Star last night.

When asked about the duration of deployment of the armed forces, he said no time limit had been set for it. "They will be withdrawn once the situation comes under control," he added.

A number of BDR personnel have been on the run while many arms and ammunition remain missing since the

operation.

As per GO a one-member family will receive 11 Kilogram of rice, 12 kg flower, 1.75 kg sugar, 2.5 liter edible oil, 3.5 kg pulse and 37.324 kg kindling while a two-member family will have 20 kg of rice, 20 kg flower, 3 kg sugar, 4.5 liter edible oil and 5.5 kg pulse.

A three-member family will have 30 kg of rice, 25 kg flower, 4 kg sugar, 6 liter edible oil and 7 kg pulse while a four-member family will receive 35 kg of rice, 30 kg flower, 5 kg sugar, 8 liter edible oil and 8 kg pulse.

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AL lawmaker Suranjit Sengupta said he had not seen such an instance in parliament before. He suggested that the speaker expunge the entire discussion leaving alone the speeches of Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia.

"We do not know why the leader of the opposition wanted discussion on the obituary motion. What did she want?" Sengupta said.

Referring to former BNP-led alliance government's indifference to probing and holding trials of the August 21 grenade attack case, Sengupta said, "They came here today with the same mentality. They did not come here with sympathy."

BNP lawmaker MK Anwar, however, put the blame on the speaker for letting the discussion be held. He said the speaker himself suggested that only the leader of the House and the leader of the opposition should speak on the obituary motion.

The treasury and opposition bench lawmakers, however, described the massacre as a planned conspiracy to weaken the country's defence forces and demanded quick trial to ensure exemplary punishment of the perpetrators.

Taking part in the discussion, Commerce Minister Faruk Khan said the government has already collected a lot of information. "We know who sent SMS [texted] to BDR members asking them not to surrender arms. We know who brought out procession encouraging the BDR butchers," the commerce minister said urging the prime minister to handle the situation with an iron fist. "None will be spared," Faruk said.

Citing some military operations and their causality figures in neighbouring countries, the commerce minister said those who are talking about military operations do not know the nature of such operations.

The House adopted the obituary motion on the deaths of one major general, one brigadier general, 17 colonel, 11 Lt Colonel, 17 Major and one captain brutally killed by jawans of BDR during a mutiny at BDR headquarters on February 25-26.

Referring to the latest information, the obituary motion said 72 army officials are still missing. Work on recovering and identifying them is going on. The names of the missing and their details will be made available on completion of the recovery task.

When all the names of the deceased will be available, the names will be included in the obituary motion which will be published as a book and sent to the families of the slain army officials.

The House also expressed condolences to the deaths of civilians in the carnage.

Wednesday's mutiny at the BDR headquarters.

Meanwhile, the government decided to restructure the probe body formed to investigate the bloody mutiny at the BDR headquarters.

Representatives from the home ministry, armed forces division, Rab and police department will be included in it.

The government is also working on the modus operandi of the proposed special tribunal for trying the people responsible for the massacre.

Meanwhile, around 2:00pm yesterday a Rab-2 team cordoned off Ganakotli Lane in the capital and searched around 700 houses for firearms, ammunitions and fugitive BDR jawans, said locals.

They detained a man with 30 rounds of bullet at Ganakotli Lane yesterday. The detainee was Mohammad Yusuf, 35, a resident of the area.

Director of Rab's Legal and Media Wing AK Azad said on government order Rab was conducting a massive drive to capture the rebel BDR jawans since February 26.

Armenians in mass rally to mark deadly clashes

AFP, Yerevan

Thousands of opposition supporters defied the Armenian authorities yesterday to rally on the first anniversary of the country's deadliest political clashes since the 1991 break-up of the Soviet Union.

More than 10,000 people gathered for the rally in central Yerevan, which the authorities had refused to sanction, carrying placards reading "Free Political Prisoners" and "For Early Elections", an AFP correspondent reported.

Opposition leader and former president Levon Ter-Petrosian told the crowd he would not give up his fight against President Serzh Sarkisian and would use "constitutional means" to force early elections.