

Lanka denies UN charges of firing on civilians

US voices concern over 'safe zone' deaths

AFP, Colombo

War-hit Sri Lanka Saturday denied UN charges that troops had fired into a safe zone for civilians and said allegations that 2,800 non-combatants had been killed in recent weeks were "unsubstantiated".

Human Rights Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe accused United Nations human rights chief Navi Pillay of relying on "pro-rebel" information in making her allegations on Friday in respect of the decades-long separatist conflict.

"It's very, very unprofessional of her (Pillay's) office to rely on unsubstantiated figures," Samarasinghe told reporters in Colombo. "The figures are similar to those on Tiger proxy websites."

"The army is not shelling into the safe zone for civilians."

Colombo has set up at least two so-called safe zones in the embattled north of the island in which civilians can take refuge. Tamil Tiger rebels say they do not fire on innocent people at all, whether in safe zones or not.

Troops have trapped the Tamil rebels in a narrow strip of coastal land in the north-eastern district of Mullaitivu, where they hope to crush the guerrillas by next month.

The international community has begun applying pressure on Colombo amid fears for innocent people caught up in the fighting for an independent homeland for Tamils.

On Friday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, urging the military to avoid firing at civilians in the safety zone and asking that aid agencies get full access to people in need.

"Secretary Hillary Clinton expressed the United States' deep concern over the deteriorating conditions and increasing loss of life occurring in the designated safe zone," US state department spokesman Gordon Duguid said.

Hillary Clinton told Colombo that Sri Lankan troops "should not fire into civilian areas of the conflict zone" and urged him to allow

humanitarian groups full access to people in need, said a State Department spokesman.

The secretary called Rajapaksa to "express the United States' deep concern over the deteriorating conditions and increasing loss of life" in the government-designated zone in the country's north, he said in a statement.

Last month the government in Colombo asked men, women and children to move to a stretch of coastline as troops advanced on rebel positions in the north in a bid to crush all remaining pockets of resistance by Tamil Tiger rebels.

Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona called Hillary Clinton's remarks "exaggerated".

"The state is not plotting to kill civilians," said foreign ministry consultant Rohan Perera. "If they are looking at war crimes, they must point the finger the other way (at the Tigers)."

Sri Lanka has accused the Tigers of holding 70,000 civilians, including local UN aid workers, hostage in the tiny territory still under their control as a human shield -- a charge the rebels deny.

The UN, however, says 150,000-180,000 civilians are trapped by the fighting and are at risk as they remain cornered in the shrinking rebel territory.

"Certain actions being undertaken by the Sri Lankan military and by the LTTE (Tamil Tiger rebels) may constitute violations of international human rights and humanitarian law," Pillay had said.

"We need to know more... but we know enough to be sure, the situation is absolutely desperate. The world today is ever sensitive about such acts that could amount to war crimes," she added.

"The current level of civilian casualties is truly shocking, and there are legitimate fears the loss of life may reach catastrophic levels," Pillay warned.

The government bars most journalists and aid workers from the north of the island, meaning the claims cannot be confirmed.

Bashundhara

FROM PAGE 1

She enquired about the progress in the investigation and the damage done by the inferno.

PM's adviser Maj Gen (retd) Tarique Ahmed Siddiqui was also present.

Meanwhile, the relatives of the seven victims burnt to death at the complex received the bodies without any autopsy.

The dead are Bashundhara City Complex firemen Baki Billah, 40, Anisur Rahman Babu, 22, and Harun-ur Rashid, 48, electrician Ibrahim Mondal, 37, supervisor Mohammad Ali, 55, decorator Renu Sarkar, 27, and plumber Mohammad Hamdul, 25.

Of them, Baki slipped and fell while trying to climb down a rope. The rest were burnt to death getting trapped on the 17th floor.

Home Minister Sahara Khatun and Finance Minister AMA Muhith yesterday visited the injured at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Both the ministers admitted that the Fire Brigade lacks necessary equipment.

The home minister said Fire Brigade will be modernised soon with state of the art equipment and fire fighters will be given training to tackle such fire incidents efficiently in future.

The finance minister said the three-member enquiry committee will examine all aspects of the fire incident.

Fire Brigade Director (Training) Maj Matiuur Rahman, also a member of the probe body, told The Daily Star, "The fire gutted five floors -- from 15 to 19 -- and damaged the 14th floor partially."

He said they talked to two Bashundhara Complex architects about the mall's fire-fighting system.

Iqbal Khan Chowdhury, joint secretary (Police) of home ministry and also head of the committee, said, "We are collecting information from the witnesses to find out the cause of the fire."

Diarrhoea

FROM PAGE 16

usually we don't have more than 250. But during this season, as the situation is deteriorating every day and we had to set up extended temporary tents," said Prof Shahadat Hossain, scientist and head of longer stay unit of ICDDR,B.

While talking to The Daily Star he also said some 618 patients had been admitted to the hospital till yesterday evening and the number might exceed 800 by midnight. On Friday there were 652 patients.

The situation is not likely to get any better soon until the water supply in Dhaka improves. The increasing number of diarrhoea patients might linger during April and May as the temperature rises, said the scientists of ICDDR,B.

The experts suggest that everybody should drink boiled water and avoid unhygienic food.

Workers

FROM PAGE 1

Minister Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, however, earlier said Malaysia would allow them all entry and employment.

The Malaysian authorities are taking such measures after cancellation of over 55,000 work visas to Bangladeshis on March 10. The country also had earlier directed the airlines not to carry Bangladeshi workers.

The minister said it might happen because Malaysia has given blanket orders to their immigration to restrict the entry of Bangladeshi workers.

"But those going to that country with work permit should be allowed entry," he said, adding he will write special letters to the Malaysian authorities if he is informed by those now on vacation with valid work permit.

"There might be 5,000 to 7,000 workers on vacation. They must inform their position to me to write to the Malaysian authorities," he added.

Meanwhile, as many as 25 Bangladeshi workers returned home from Malaysia, 114 from Singapore and 34 others were deported from the United Arab Emirates in last two days, according to an official at Zia International Airport.

The frustrated workers say they went abroad following all legal procedures and paying Tk2-4 lakh.

"I went to Malaysia one and a half years ago but was provided with job only for six months. My agent neither gave me a job nor any salary. Police also kept me in jail for three months for non renewal of work permit," said Amanat Ali, a worker from Comilla.

He said hundreds of workers in Malaysia are waiting for similar fate.

Heads high

FROM PAGE 16

Marjuk Sultan from Sunshine Grammar School and College got 5 As in one sitting in January 2008 while Ahsan Mosharraf Barkatullah from Scholastica obtained 6 As in one academic year -- one A in January 2008 and 5 As in May-June 2008.

Eight O-level students scored the highest marks worldwide in pure mathematics, accounting, Bangla, biology, chemistry, economics, English language, human biology, Bangladesh studies, mathematics, computing, English literature and Physics under the Edexcel board.

Meanwhile, 12 A-level students under the same board obtained the highest marks worldwide in accounting, mathematics, pure mathematics, chemistry, further mathematics and physics.

Three O-level students under Cambridge International Examinations scored the highest marks worldwide in Bangla, computer studies and human and social biology.

The Daily Star at its 10th annual award presentation ceremony also handed out special honours to 41 O and A level students for achieving the highest marks in the country.

Among them, 13 students under Edexcel International and 11 under Cambridge International secured the highest marks in the country at O-level examinations in different subjects.

Twelve students under Edexcel International and five students under Cambridge International achieved highest marks in the country in different A-level subjects.

WHAT THE ACHIEVERS SAY
Rumana Fouzia Choudhury of Sunbeams School, who obtained 11 As in O-level exams in a single sitting in the May-June 2008, considers private tuitions unnecessary for students.

Dangers lurk

FROM PAGE 1

on the 14th floor said that a regular firefighting drill is crucial for fire safety.

When asked about a firefighting exercise Alam said, "I think it is not possible at this moment, as the mechanism may not be in proper condition to do that."

The under-construction 27-storey Doreen Tower at Gulshan intersection-2 has a staircase only 3.5 feet in width with an elevator for everyday use.

"We will use the staircase as an emergency fire exit," said Doreen's Assistant Chief Operating Officer Mostafa Moin.

Kazi Golam Nasir, deputy chief architect of the department of architecture, however, said Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) of 1993 stipulates that a building above six-storey should have at least two staircases with one for emergency fire exit.

Fire protection act of 2003 says a building above six-storey requires prior clearance from the Fire Service and Civil Defence Department, he added.

Moin, however, said, "We will seek clearance from the Fire Brigade after completion of the building."

With all the floors of Doreen already constructed the water reservoir required for firefighting is yet to be built.

Doreen's Assistant Project Controller Wahiduzzaman Noman said they would set up modern firefighting equipment in the building.

The fire safety gear installed during the construction of the twenty-storey Jiban Bima Tower at Dilkusha has already become inoperative rendering it completely vulnerable to the fire, said officials and security guards of different offices housed in the building.

The building has an emergency exit but most of the doors of different floors leading to the emergency exit remain closed round the clock. The hydrants on different floors set up during its construction have also been out of order for ages, they added.

Fire extinguishers are not available on most of the floors, they said.

The building experienced two fires --- on 12th and 4th floors -- within a span of eight months when hydrants could not be used, as those had long been out of order, said Md Sharif, a security guard of City Bank housed in the building.

They said they feel very unsafe, as not a single fire extinguisher is available on their floor.

The 24-storey Shilpa Bank Bhaban on the DIT Road has an emergency exit, hydrants and fire extinguishers on each floor but it lacks trained manpower to operate those.

Mofizul Islam, security officer of the building said

"I studied all 11 subjects on my own," she said while addressing the ceremony.

"If I can do it, so can you," she said.

Rumana who wants to pursue higher studies in either medical science or economics expressed hope that Bangladesh will prosper in the face of all obstacles.

"This country has never accepted defeat in face of adversity... Bangladesh will one day be completely rid of poverty, diseases and injustice. It is true that this will not happen overnight, but this collective dream will become a reality if we spend time in constructive activities," she said.

Risalat Khan of European Standard, who obtained 5 As in his A-level exams, said the country has an immense resource in its people.

He observed that the scope to learn about the country's rich cultural heritage and history is not adequate under the English medium curriculum available in the country.

"How ignorant we are of our own past, of the origin of the very land we live in," he said, urging school authorities to take special initiatives in this regard.

Risalat, who wants to pursue environmental studies, thinks the new generation have the potential to build a prosperous nation.

Asked if he would like to go abroad for higher studies, Azam said, "Yes, I would, but will surely return to use my expertise here."

He proposed that all students get united and do some community service in the country.

Nandita Khan Nitol, who secured the highest marks worldwide in Bengali, said a simple desire to learn Bengali and learn about the cultural heritage of the country is all that it takes to get going.

they have five well-trained employees but the security guards of different offices of other floors are not skilled and trained.

A visit to a couple of top floors of the 15-storey landmark building at Gulshan saw neither any hydrants nor fire detectors. The building has two staircases and some fire extinguisher cylinders were found on several floors.

Employees of an insurance company on the 15th floor and a female employee of another private company on the 13th floor said that they have no knowledge about any firefighting devices in the building.

When asked staffers at Landmark's office advised this correspondent to meet Biswanath Gope, the manager of the office, but they declined to give his phone number under the excuse of being newcomers.

The 24-storey Eunoos Centre at Dilkusha constructed in 2005 had an emergency exit and some firefighting equipment including hydrants and Gundola (rope of wire).

During the visit no fire extinguishers were found on any of the floors of the building although different offices have extinguishers on their own.

Manager of Eunoos Centre MH Akram said they did not have extinguishers as only 30 percent floors of the building is now being used.

He said they would have a board meeting on Sunday where they would decide on setting up extinguishers, forming a special firefighting team apart from existing security guards.

We will buy some high-tech equipment, which can be operated even when power goes off, as hydrants don't function without electricity, he added.

Director General of Fire Service and Civil Defence Abu Nayeem Md Shahidullah said as most of the owners of high-rise buildings and shopping malls of the city do not arrange for training they fail to get the mechanism launched during fire incident.

"Fire Prevention Act must be incorporated into the provision of mobile court so that it can take steps in this regard to ensure safety," he said.

As per the act each floor should have at least two fire extinguishers, hydrants, water reservoir and a tank on the top that will always preserve a certain amount of water.

Every high-rise building and market also needs to provide training to its firefighting team by Fire Service and Civil Defence and they should continue the training by themselves each month, he suggested.

Rajshahi colleges

FROM PAGE 1

RU unit ICS organising secretary Farhad Alam yesterday filed a case against over 33 BCL men with Mother police station in connection with the killing of its general secretary Shariuzzaman Noman.

BCL RU unit president Ibrahim Hossain Moon, cultural secretary Joy and legal affairs secretary Roni, among others, were made accused in the case.

The RU authorities formed a probe committee at its syndicate meeting yesterday to investigate the Friday's violence at RU.

The provost council of RU also met RU Vice-chancellor Prof Abdus Sobhan at his office and discussed the campus situation.

Later, an hour-long meeting was held at RU VC Lounge with VC Abdus Sobhan in the chair to discuss law and order on the campus.

DC Shefal Karim, Police Commissioner Mahbub Mohsin, Additional Police Commissioner Hafizur Rahman, Deputy Police Commissioner Sazzadur Rahman, Assistant Police Commissioner Zahangir Hossain and Mother thana OC Rafiqul Islam were also present in the meeting.

When contacted RU Proctor Prof Zakaria told The Daily Star that its registrar will file a case with the police station in connection with Friday's violence.

Restriction has been imposed on entry in RU campus while check posts set up at the entry points of the university.

Additional police have been deployed on the campus to avert further clash.

Pro-Awami League teachers of RU yesterday in a statement expressed their deep concern over the Friday's bloody clashes and demanded exemplary punishment of those responsible for the violence.

DC Shefal Karim told the newsmen that Rajshahi administration will give all-out support to the RU authorities to ensure a congenial atmosphere on the campus.

Teachers, including RU proctor, assistant proctor and student adviser, visited the injured BCL and ICS men at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital and other clinics.

Syndicate members of Rajshahi University at an emergency meeting held at yesterday night urged the government to form a judicial investigation committee on the Friday's bloody clashes.

The meeting concluded at 9.00 pm without formation of any investigation committee on the incident.

Sources said, five syndicate members out of eight were Pro-Jamaat supporters criticised the role of RU authorities for the campus violence.

The meeting urged all to cooperate with the RU authorities to regain the congenial atmosphere on the campus.

Jamaat-e-Islami leaders in Rajshahi yesterday blamed Awami League for the Friday's violence that resulted in closure of all public higher educational institutions in the city while Awami League criticised Jamaat for patronising the violence.

Critising the role of police during the violence, Rajshahi City Mayor Liton also alleged that police favoured the Shibir cadres.

Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, yesterday demanded formation of judicial probe committee to investigate the killing of its leader Noman.

The demand came at a protest rally held at city's Muktangan in Dhaka.

JS session

FROM PAGE 16

The bill, which was placed in parliament after the ordinance separating the judiciary ceased to have effect on February 25, is likely to be passed tomorrow, the officials added.

The House will also include opposition lawmakers in the 47 standing committees as the main opposition BNP has already handed over a list of its lawmakers to the chief whip of treasury bench.

Formation of all standing committees was completed earlier, keeping the posts for BNP lawmakers vacant, as they did not provide their names at that time.

"We have submitted names of our lawmakers to Chief Whip Abdus Shahid recently to include their names in the respective parliamentary standing committees," Opposition Chief Whip Zainul Abdin Farroque told The Daily Star last night.

"We hope that the treasury bench will complete the formalities to form the parliamentary standing and House committees as early as possible," Farroque added.

Meanwhile, the Business Advisory Committee headed by Speaker Abdul Hamid sits prior to resumption of the House proceeding to decide the tenure of the current session, which began on January 25 and was adjourned for nine days on March 5.

The unfinished general discussion on the president's address to parliament will also resume today.

Pak govt urges

FROM PAGE 16

Police detained five people at a gathering of lawyers and Sharif supporters Saturday in the central city of Multan.

"So far our attitude is soft, but we can change our strategy," said Ali Ahmad Kurd, leader of the country's activist lawyers, said in Quetta after authorities allegedly prevented him from boarding a plane to the eastern city of Lahore.

"When one path is blocked, God opens 100 others, and we will reach Lahore and then Islamabad," said Kurd, whose road convoy was turned back by police on Friday.

The office of Pakistani President announced a package of concessions to main opposition leader Nawaz Sharif on Saturday following a two-week political stand-off.

The decisions were taken during a meeting between Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and Zardari late Saturday, it said in a statement.

The government would file an appeal to the Supreme Court against a ruling on February 25 that disqualified Sharif and his brother Shabbaz from contesting elections and holding public office, it said.

The president and prime minister also agreed that a dispute over the restoration of judges sacked under emergency rule in 2007 "would be resolved in accordance with the principles laid down in the charter of democracy".

That document, signed by Zardari's widow, assassinated former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, and Sharif in 2006, pledged to restore democracy, avoid confrontation and abolish the role of the military in politics.

The Pakistan army says its troops are on standby ahead of a planned mass demonstration by opposition parties and lawyers in the capital.

The government has vowed to prevent protesters from staging a sit-in in front of Parliament in Islamabad, raising fears of violence.

Army spokesman Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas said Saturday the government asked the military the day before to ready troops.

Abbas said the soldiers could be deployed if police and paramilitary forces cannot control the situation. He said the troops could be used to protect "sensitive areas" in Islamabad and other locations.

In another development Pakistan's Information Minister Sherry Rahman has resigned from the cabinet following differences with the top leadership over the government's media policy, Geo TV reported Saturday.

Rahman, a close associate of slain former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, put in her papers Friday night during a high-level meeting chaired by President Asif Ali Zardari, the report said, quoting sources.

She offered her resignation after differences emerged on the issue of handling the media in the context of the ongoing political crisis during the meeting, which was also attended by Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and Interior Minister Rehman Malik.

However, there was no word from the government on this.

The crisis stems from President Asif Ali Zardari's refusal to accept demands from lawyers and an array of political parties that he reinstate a group of judges fired by his predecessor, Pervez Musharraf.

It deepened last month when the Supreme Court banned Sharif and his brother from elected office. Zardari then dismissed the government of Punjab province,

Mutiny motive

FROM PAGE 1

arrested and 25 of them have been grilled while on remand, he continued.

SCOTLAND YARD TEAM LEAVES

The four-member Scotland Yard team that came to Dhaka on March 11 to help in investigations into the February carnage left the country yesterday.

Faruq Khan said the British officials have pledged further assistance.

TORAB QUIZZED

Torab Ali, detained president of the BDR retirees' welfare association, have told interrogators that he had knowledge that there might be 'some kind of problem' at the Pikhana headquarters on February 25, said sources in the Rapid Action Battalion.

Zakir, a retired junior commanding officer's son, learned it from fellow students, mostly children of serving BDR men, at a coaching centre in Jhigatola. He in turn confided in Torab on February 24.

Also president of Awami League (AL) ward No.48 unit and father of top criminal Liton alias Leather Liton, Torab is now on a five-day remand.

He was arrested by Rab at his Moneswar Road house on March 10.

Despite knowing beforehand that something untoward might take place, he did not inform the BDR authorities about it, said a source close to the investigation.

Asked why he did not contact the authorities concerned as president of the welfare association, he told interrogators that he indeed "made a huge mistake by not doing so".

Pakistan's largest, which had been led by Shabbaz Sharif.

Washington, which wants Pakistan to focus on the militant threat and help boost the faltering war effort in Afghanistan, has been pressing all sides to resolve their differences.

US Ambassador Anne Patterson met with Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani late Friday, Gilani's office said, shortly before the premier huddled with Zardari and other officials.

After talks that dragged into the early hours of Saturday, the government decided to try to defuse the tension through dialogue, a presidential statement said.

"The meeting reiterated the offer to the political forces in the country to negotiate with the government" on implementing democratic reform, the statement said.

However, it didn't indicate what concessions the government could make and made clear that, if the offer was rejected, a nationwide crackdown to thwart the protests would continue.

"The government will protect the lives and property of the citizens and maintain law and order at all cost" while staying within the bounds of the constitution, it said.

The government says it cannot allow mass demonstrations in the capital because of the threat of a terrorist attack. Authorities have blocked the main boulevard leading to Parliament with metal shipping containers and have detained scores of activists to hamper the protests, which began Thursday.

The private Geo TV channel complained Saturday that cable TV companies had blocked transmission of its coverage of the crisis in several cities.

Geo, which suffered similar harassment under Musharraf, accused Zardari of ordering the restrictions because it was "reminding the president (of) his past promises" to restore the judiciary.

BCL factions

FROM PAGE 1

Twelve rooms at the hostel were vandalised during the one-hour clash.

Of the injured, 10 including one with bullet wounds were rushed to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital and the rest to the Metropolitan Hospital and other clinics.

Sources said the cadres of Zakir and Russel groups with firearms, sticks and sharp weapons clashed at around 10:30pm and hurled home-made bombs at each other.

On information police rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control, said Assistant Commissioner of police (Tejgaon Zone) Abdul Mannan Mia.