

Lankan troops kill 38 more rebels

Critical lack of food, water and medicines, says Unicef

AFP, BBC ONLINE, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops have killed another 38 Tamil Tiger rebels and taken more territory in fierce fighting in the island's northeast, a military official here said yesterday.

Security forces killed the 38 guerrillas in several clashes in the coastal district of Mullaitivu Tuesday, the official said, adding that the military had suffered only minor casualties.

The official said the military had further shrunk the area under rebel control.

There was no comment from the Tigers, but the pro-rebel Tamilnet website claimed that 604 troops had been killed by the guerrillas in three days of fighting.

Independent verification of the casualty figures is impossible as most journalists, aid workers and international observers are prevented from entering the conflict zone.

Meanwhile, the United Nations' children's agency Unicef said yesterday that thousands of children are at risk because of "a critical lack of food, water and medicines."

The conflict in Sri Lanka has killed hundreds of children and left many more injured as intense fighting continues between Sri Lankan troops and Tamil Tiger rebels in north-eastern Sri Lanka.

The Tigers have been driven from most of the territory they held by the army.

They are now cornered in a small patch of jungle and coastal area in the Mullaitivu district.

It is estimated that between 70,000 and 200,000 civilians are caught up in the conflict zone.

The Tamil Tigers have fought for an independent homeland for Sri Lanka's Tamil minority since 1983.

More than 70,000 people have been killed in the war.

"Children and their families caught in the conflict zone are at risk of dying from disease and malnutrition," news agency AFP quoted Unicef executive director Ann Veneman as saying.

Shamsul barred from going abroad

UNB, Dhaka

The immigration authorities yesterday barred former information minister and BNP leader M Shamsul Islam from leaving the country.

The former minister was scheduled to fly for Bangkok at about 8:40pm by an aircraft of the Thai Airways for medical treatment.

Contacted over cellphone, Shamsul told the news agency that the officer-in-charge (Immigration) debarred him from boarding the flight saying that "there have been restrictions imposed on your foreign travel by higher authorities."

Probe body

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He said if firemen at the complex had used their own fire equipments immediately to douse the fire, it would not have spread fast.

Bashundhara City Complex authorities, however, refused the statement, saying if their fire fighters had not tried to put out the fire, it would have engulfed the entire complex.

The probe committee will submit its report by Saturday.

Donors keen

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said a nuclear power plant holds out hope for solving the power crisis.

"At the moment, some donor countries and agencies turned in proposals for investment in nuclear power plants," the MCCI chief said referring to their talks with the premier.

The government has taken an initiative to implement the long-pending Rooppur nuclear power plant, the PM earlier informed parliament on March 4.

Meanwhile, the government has prepared a proposal, which mentioned that the nuclear power plant to be set up at Rooppur in the western region of the country will be of 600MW capacity.

At yesterday's meeting, MCCI leaders raised the issue of electricity crisis.

Hasina said the present crisis would not have affected the country if the last Awami League government could have implemented all its projects.

Myanmar

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prepared to deal with any kind of situation.

He said the BDR jawans have been patrolling the Bang, desh-Myanmar borders cautiously.

Meanwhile, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Hasan Mahmud said the situation along the Bangladesh-Myanmar borders remained calm and border trade between the two neighbouring countries continued normally, adds UNB.

In the wake of latest developments on the border, one ship of Bangladesh Navy equipped with highly sophisticated technologies, including radar covering 15 nautical miles, is deployed in the Bay of Bengal near Myanmar waters," he said.

Sources said Myanmar soldiers were seen erecting barbed-wire fences on the south-western side of the Gumdhum border since yesterday morning.

The neighbouring country deployed additional troops along the border, sources added.

Mamun gets HC bail in Niko case

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court (HC) yesterday granted ad-interim bail for two months to Giasuddin Al Mamun, a close aide to BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's elder son Tarique Rahman, in connection with the Niko corruption case.

The HC bench of Justice Syed AB Mahmudul Huq and Justice Moyeenul Islam Chowdhury also issued a rule upon the government to show cause why Mamun should not be granted regular bail.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) filed the case with Tejgaon Police Station against Khaleda Zia and four others on December 9, 2007, under the emergency powers rules (EPR) 2007. Mamun's name was later incorporated in the case.

Mamun's lawyer SM Sabir Hamza Chowdhury recently filed a petition with the HC seeking bail in this case.

He told The Daily Star that his client (Mamun) couldn't be released from the jail at this moment since he is accused in seven other criminal cases. A total of 17 cases were filed against him. Of them, he was granted bail in ten cases so far, he said.

Mamun was arrested on March 25, 2007 during the interregnum period of the past caretaker government.

450 more

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Malaysia were in jails for not renewing their work permits.

"I went to Malaysia in late 2007. I had no money to send home or to pay to the employer for renewing work permits, as I had no good job. So, immigration police arrested me and kept me in jail for 7 months," said Awlad Hossain, a returnee from Malaysia.

Those who returned from Saudi Arabia were also in jail.

Meanwhile, International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) Bangladesh Council yesterday requested International Labour Organization and ITUC head office to take immediate steps to protect the rights of the Bangladeshi migrant workers who are losing jobs.

Expressing concern over the present job cuts of foreign workers, ITUC-Bangladesh Council in a statement said Malaysia's decision of cancelling of 55,000 work visas for Bangladeshis will bring serious consequences for the workers.

It urged the Malaysian government and trade unions to come to an amicable solution in this regard, says a press release.

Tanbir urges

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He, however, did not allow reporters to ask him any question.

Termining the party's disciplinary action against him 'unconstitutional', he said, "According to the party constitution, I am still a member of the party as well as its standing committee."

"I shall not get into any argument although I do not know what my fault was," Tanbir said.

BNP Standing Committee on Tuesday expelled Siddiky from the party for his son Irad Siddiky's "derogatory remarks" about party Chief Khaleda Zia and a few BNP leaders in his presence.

Irad at a press conference on March 9 alleged that the BNP chairperson sought Tk 5 crore from him in return for party backing for his candidacy in the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) mayoral election.

Claiming himself as 'one of the founding fathers' of BNP, Tanbir said, "I have always been with BNP and shall remain with it.... The decision against me has shocked the nation."

"The people who have made many objectionable and derogatory remarks against Zia family in the last two years are now in good position in the party but they (standing committee) have punished me for others' mistakes," he said.

"There is nothing to challenge the decision but the countrymen must know why I was handed down the punishment," Tanbir said.

Claiming himself as a 'clean man' and 'great organiser', he said, "Even from the political or moral point of view, they (standing committee) cannot take such a decision [expulsion] against me."

Form special team

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"The police forces need to be modernised to combat militancy," committee chief Maj Gen (ret'd) Abdus Salam told reporters after the meeting at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.

He also said 30,000 members will be recruited in police in next three years.

Meanwhile, Home Minister Sahara Khatun during the question-answer session in parliament informed the House about the government measures to combat militancy.

"The law-enforcement and intelligence agencies are working in a coordinated way to thwart militants' efforts to regroup," Sahara said.

She added the government has planned to bring the godfathers of outlawed militant outfit JMB to justice to root out militancy. Besides, process is underway to formulate a strategy paper to combat terrorism and militancy, she said.

In reply to a query of Awami League lawmaker Israfil Alam, the home minister said 680 people were killed in custody of the law-enforcement agencies from 2002 to February 2009. No move was made to form a judicial or parliamentary body to probe the deaths except executive investigation, which is also underway, she added.

Responding to a query of Jamaat-e-Islami lawmaker AHM Hamidur Rahman, the minister said 3,129 arms licences were issued against 2,966 people and 163 institutions during the immediate past caretaker government.

In response to another query of AL lawmaker Amjad Hossain, Sahara said 156 people were killed and 77 people were held in connection with the killings since the present government assumed office on January 6.

On a query of AL lawmaker MAbdul Latif, Sahara informed the House about the government's plans to modernise the Coast Guard by 2020 with sufficient equipment and increase its personnel.

Replying another query of AL lawmaker Mahmudus Samad Chowdhury, the minister said Lt Col (ret'd) MA Rashed Chowdhury, convicted killer of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, has recently applied to the US government for permanent citizenship.

On receiving information from NCB, Washington, the Bangladesh government has issued a red notice and informed the NCB about it.

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Dipu Moni in reply to AL lawmaker Shahiduzzaman Sarkar in a scripted answer said 6,116 Bangladeshis are now behind bars in different countries.

Of them, 1,514 are in Saudi Arabia, 2,292 in Malaysia, 260 in Pakistan, 174 in the UK, 158 in Qatar, 222 in Singapore, 330 in Kuwait and 162 are in the UAE.

The foreign minister said the government has taken different steps to bring them back.

28 JS BODIES RECONSTITUTED

The House yesterday reconstituted 28 parliamentary standing committees on different ministries incorporating names of BNP-led opposition lawmakers.

The House unanimously passed the proposal of Chief Whip Abdus Shahid incorporating names of the BNP-led main opposition lawmakers in the respective committees.

Earlier in this month, opposition Chief Whip Zainul Abidin Farouque submitted names of its lawmakers for including in different parliamentary standing committees.

No plan to clip

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Democracy (CoD) because it was essential for a better future for Pakistan.

"The government will implement the Charter of Democracy as signed by slain PPP chairwoman Benazir Bhutto and PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif in letter and spirit," he said.

Gilani appreciated Nawaz's positive response to his policy of reconciliation, adding: "The government will file a review petition against the disqualification of the Sharif brothers after the Supreme Court issues its detailed verdict."

He did not rule out the prospects of a coalition with the PML-N in the federal government, saying "politics is a day-to-day affair."

The government on Tuesday okayed the reinstatement of all sacked judges of the Supreme and High courts including sacked chief justice Iftekhar Muhammad Chaudhry on their pre-November 3, 2007 positions.

"The president of Pakistan is pleased to restore Justice Iftekhar Muhammad Chaudhry, the deposed CJP (chief justice of Pakistan), to the position he was

holding immediately before November 3, 2007," one government notification said.

"He will assume office of CJP on March 22, after the retirement of CJP Abdul Hameed Dogar on March 21."

The second notification said other sacked judges would assume office with immediate effect.

The reinstated judges of the Supreme Court are: Justice Javed Iqbal, Justice Khalilur Rehman Ramdad, Justice Raja Fayyaz Ahmed and Justice Chaudhry Ijaz Ahmad. The reinstated judges of the Lahore High Court are: Justice Khawaja Muhammad Sharif, Justice Ijaz Ahmed Chaudhry and Justice Iqbal Hameedur Rehman.

The reinstated judges also include Justice Mushir Alam and Justice Maqbool Baqar of the Sindh High Court and Justice Ejaz Afzal Khan of the Peshawar High Court.

The law secretary told reporters the sacked judges would not be administered a fresh oath.

RU violence

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The case stated that local Shibir cadres Shahin, Raju, Alamgir, Robi, Shawon, Salam and Dildar with 30 others surrounded him at a Binodpur Bazar restaurant with sharp weapons, firearms, hand bombs and iron rods. They gravely stabbed him for being an Awami League supporter.

Rafiqul Islam, officer-in-charge (OC) of the police station, yesterday confirmed filing of the case and said police had already started investigations on the previous cases. However, no one yet has been arrested in this connection.

Earlier on March 15, BCL RU unit Cultural Affairs Secretary Awal Kabir Joy, activist Shakhawat Hossain and local AL activist Muhammad Aslam filed separate cases against 222 Shibir leaders, cadres and Jamaat leaders with the same police station.

RU unit Shibir Organising Secretary Farhad Alam also filed a case against over 33 BCL men with Motihar Police Station in connection with the murder of RU unit Shibir General Secretary Sharifuzzaman Nomani on March 13.

Meanwhile, chaired by the vice-chancellor, the RU authorities held a meeting at the VC's office on resuming the university academic and administrative activities. RU registrar, treasurer and examination controller were present at the meeting.

However, following the clashes all higher educational institutions in the city, including Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (Ruet), have been closed for an indefinite period.

Hamid says

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mentioned my period, I can assure you that the investigation will also focus on my period," Hamid added.

The speaker also said he already asked the comptroller and auditor general to submit all the audit reports since independence.

Asked about the 700 reports lying pending with the public accounts committee, he said he was not aware of the matter.

"This is for the first time all the committees have been constituted in the parliament's first session. All the committees have started working," he said.

Hamid also said strengthening the committees will play a major role in curbing corruption in the country.

Govt to get

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As per the new provision, executive magistrates might be empowered to take cognisance of offences upon receiving a complaint of facts in writing made by any police officer and upon information received from any person other than a police officer, or upon his own knowledge or suspicion, that such offence has been committed.

Legal experts said judicial magistrates also maintain the same procedure in taking cognisance of offences.

Asked about the significance of the recommendation, eminent jurist Shahdeen Malik told The Daily Star last night, "Such authority is liable to be easily abused and hence I apprehend about the possible future misuse of this power."

Besides, it is clearly against the spirit of the Supreme Court's verdict on separation of the judiciary, he added.

The committee made the recommendation following the demands of the Administrative Service Association. In support of the demands, the association earlier said it could not run the administration effectively if executive magistrates cannot take cognisance of offences.

The admin cadres appointed as magistrates before separation of the judiciary exercised the authority and held trial. They lost the authority following separation of the judiciary from the executive and they were officially termed as executive magistrates.

The Judicial Service Association strongly opposed the admin cadres' proposals, saying the proposals are tantamount to contempt of the Supreme Court's verdict on separation of the judiciary.

The ordinances promulgated by the caretaker government separating the judiciary were not ratified in parliament and the government later placed a new bill in parliament for continuation of the separation.

The MP hopefuls from JP are advocate Salma Islam, Noor-e-Hasna Lily Chowdhury, Nasrin Jahan Ratna and Mahababin Moshed.

EC Deputy Secretary Jesmine Tuli, also the returning officer, will announce the elections for the reserved seats in parliament.

FBI urged to check

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Tuesday night, visited the border guards' Pilkhana headquarters yesterday. The visitors along with local investigators went there at about 10:30 am and saw the places of occurrence for around four hours.

Brig Gen Md Mainul Islam, director general of the BDR, told The Daily Star, "The FBI team visited all the crime scenes at Pilkhana. Members of the probe body formed by the home ministry and investigators from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) accompanied them... I also talked to them."

Sources said the FBI team had separate meetings with the probe body formed by the home ministry, and the CID investigators.

Contacted, Abdul Kahar Akond, CID senior assistant superintendent of police (ASP), who is leading the CID probe team, declined to say anything.

Other CID sources however said both the probe bodies briefed the FBI team about the massacre and informed them about the progress in their investigations.

Talking to reporters after a meeting with the Sri Lankan high commissioner in Dhaka at his ministry, Faruk Khan said probes into the mutiny are going on properly, and the reports would be made public soon.

"We are not hiding anything. We have been transparent from the beginning. We will disclose everything by making the investigation reports public," he said.

Asked why foreign connection is being suspected, the minister said, "So many army officers cannot be killed only for a few kilograms of rice."

Faruk Khan noted that Bangladesh has considerable economic might in many fields including garment sector, and reputation in UN peacekeeping missions.

"The BDR mutiny was staged to damage the country's economy, the armed forces and the nation's morale," the minister said.

He will have a meeting with the FBI team today to discuss the latest state of investigation. Asked if 'anti-liberation forces' were involved in the carnage, he said, "Please be patient, the probe reports will reveal everything."

The minister again called upon the fugitive BDR men to surrender. He also urged people to help the law enforcers to track down suspected mutineers.

Meanwhile, a Scotland Yard team from the UK also came to Bangladesh to help probe the BDR mutiny and massacre.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had earlier sought cooperation from both the FBI and Scotland Yard to probe the carnage that left 76 people, including 56 army officers and their family members, brutally killed.

No respite

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PDB yesterday proposed for suspension of gas based fertilizer production in Chittagong Urea Fertilizer Factory (CUFL), which will relieve significant amount of gas for generation and supply of power in Chittagong region.

But the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation vehemently opposed the proposal.

The official announcement of giving more gas for generation of power by suspension of two gas-based fertilizer factories is described as a mere 'bluff'.

Ghorasal and Palash fertilizer factories were said to be suspending production. But these two factories are already closed for long for overhauling and rehabilitation, officials said.

PDB yesterday generated about 3,600 MW electricity against the official demand of 4,625 MW and unofficial demand of more than 5,000 MW.

Demand is rising every day with the advent of summer. Load shedding continued as usual across the country with huge power shortage.

According to official sources, the government on Tuesday suspended gas supply to the two fertilizer factories in Narsingdi district.

"These two factories--Ghorasal and Palash--remained closed for long. So, gas supply suspension does not arise," said a senior official of the industries ministry.

Ghorasal factory, which consumes bulk supply of gas has production capacity of 3.7 million metric tons urea fertilizer per annum. It remained closed since August 2007 for overhauling and rehabilitation.

Recent attempt to resume production in Ghorasal factory on test-run basis failed due to technical reason. Palash fertilizer factory remained closed for the last few months.

These two factories consume only 15 million cubic feet gas per day (MMCFD). As they were closed, they did not consume any gas.

"If PDB wants to operate all its closed power plants, then it has to be supplied with additional 170-200 MMCFD gas," said a top PDB official.

He said that PDB offered the government to close the CUFL which consumes 52 MMCFD per day.

"If the CUFL is closed, then we can get another 52 MMCFD which would lead to a major improvement in the generation side. Because, then we can generate additional 300 MW power in Rawjan and other plants in Chittagong region," the PDB official claimed.

NGOs under scanner

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"The caretaker government initiated some moves to stop terror funding. This will be strengthened further," Muhith added.

During the rule of the four-party alliance government the NGO Bureau listed 473 local and 25 foreign NGOs. Since 1990 it has approved 2,367 local and foreign NGOs that run on foreign funding.

Following the 2005 country-wide bomb attacks by Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), the then BNP-Jamaat alliance government took up drives against Islamist militants.

Intelligence agencies had already reported that certain Middle East-based NGOs were funding terrorism, but the government did not take any action against those.

Intelligence reports categorically recommended banning the Kuwait-based Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS) and taking action against a number of other Middle Eastern organisations found to have links with Islamist extremists.

In 2002, the US Department of State blacklisted some RIHS offices, citing their support to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

But the alliance government failed to entertain RIHS top leaders.

The RIHS chief was on a visit to Dhaka during the August bomb attack of JMB and he met three cabinet members.

Intelligence had also reported that militant group Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (Ahab) also receive such funding. Ahab chief Asadullah Al Galib himself talked about receiving funds from NGO Ar-Rib.

The banned Harkatul Jihad, responsible for a number of gruesome killings and grenade attacks, also receive foreign funding. Intelligence reports said the JMB spent roughly Tk 60 lakh a year for maintaining its fulltime leaders and cadres, and Tk 1-5 crore for buying explosives and firearms and executing attacks.

Other suspected NGOs include Rabita Al-Alam Al-Islami, Al-Muntada Al-Islami, Society of Social Reforms, Qatar Charitable Society, Islamic Relief Agency, Al-Forkan Foundation, International Relief Organisation, Kuwait Joint Relief Committee, Muslim Aid Bangladesh, Dar Al-Khair, Hayatul Igachha and Tawheed-e-Noor.

These NGOs have been operating in the country since the 1990s.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Bank Governor Salehuddin Ahmed yesterday said the central bank has intensified monitoring at commercial banks to find if there is any link between suspicious transactions and militants, reports UNB.

"We are examining the transactions afresh," he told reporters after attending a workshop styled "Micro-insurance and Poverty" at Palli Karma Shahayak Foundation Bhaban at Agargaon.

The central bank is also exchanging information with institutions like the Anti-Corruption Commission to identify the suspicious transactions, the governor added.