

Thai protesters besiege Asean summit venue

AFP, Pattaya

Thai protesters laid siege to a summit of Asian leaders yesterday, clashing with security forces and forcing their struggle to oust the prime minister into the international spotlight.

At least 2,000 opponents of Thai Premier Abhisit Vejjajiva were locked in a tense stand-off with troops and riot police at the beach hotel where leaders from China, Japan and 14 other nations were gathering for the

24 arrested in Rajshahi sent to jail

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

A court here sent 24 cadres of Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Purbo Banglar Communist Party (PBCP) to jail custody yesterday when they were produced before the court.

Police implicated three PBCP leaders in murder cases and sent eight persons as JMB suspects and 13 others as underground PBCP suspects to jail under section 54 of CrP.

"Even if we caught them on suspicion, we are still investigating their roles," said Abdul Kuddus Chowdhury, additional superintendent of police in Rajshahi.

PBCP commanders Amjad Hossain Baxi and Abul Hossain and another leader Sajjat Hossain were shown arrested in different murder cases.

Police in a special drive arrested 24 persons from Bagmara upazila in the district on Thursday.

three-day meet.

British-born Abhisit vowed the summit, which is focused on finding ways to fight the global financial crisis, would go ahead. It has already been postponed and relocated several times because of Thailand's political turmoil.

"We will ensure that the meeting will proceed smoothly," he told a press conference. "I would like to reiterate that we can provide security."

Red-shirted protesters loyal to fugitive ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra breached several security cordons to reach the venue, then surged through a perimeter fence and scuffled with about 500 soldiers who forced them back.

The major security breach came despite repeated assurances from Abhisit's four-month-old government that it would not let the kingdom's long-running internal political troubles disrupt the meeting officially starting on Friday.

"Today we are not coming to stop the summit. We have come to join the summit to represent the Thai people because Abhisit cannot be responsible for our rights," protest leader Arisun Pongreung told AFP.

Police later escorted Arisun, a former pop singer, and a delegation of protesters into the building to present a protest letter, after which the crowd agreed to disperse but promised to return the following day.

Security forces had offered little resistance to the surging crowd, amid fears of a repeat of political violence in Bangkok in October in which two people died.

Asean chief Surin Pitsuwan said Asian nations were concerned by the rally at the summit, the biggest gathering of

international leaders since last week's G20 meeting in London.

"Certainly there is a level of concern, but as I said, it's part of democracy," he told reporters.

Protesters launched new mass rallies in Bangkok Wednesday to push Abhisit to resign, insisting that he came to power undemocratically through a court ruling that toppled Thaksin's allies in December.

Jewellery shop gutted in shopping mall

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

An under-construction jewellery shop was gutted in a fire at a six-storey shopping mall in the city's Farmgate yesterday.

Fire brigade sources said the fire damaged the shop located on the 3rd floor of Sejan Point shopping mall at about 1:30pm.

Three units of fighters in the city extinguished the fire after half an hour of efforts.

Fire brigade officials suspect that the fire might have originated from a burning cigarette butt.

It was the third incidents of fire at shopping malls in the city. A devastating fire gutted Basundhara City Shopping Complex on March 13 and a food shop at Rifles Square shopping mall on March 30.

Criminal

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3:15am, his accomplices opened fire on the law enforcers prompting them to retaliate.

Nasir was killed in the shoot-out while his cohorts managed to escape.

Rab said they recovered three firearms and five bullets from the spot.

In March the home minister told parliament that a total of 373 people were killed in crossfire during the tenure of previous BNP-led government.

JP won't object

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said JP Chief HM Ershad, who was the army chief at that time, could only make recommendation about the allotment. The final decision came from the then government.

However, it has to be found out what actually happened at that time, said Anisul.

Referring to militancy, he said, "We should remain careful and work together to combat militancy. But if the issue is overlaid it might tarnish the country's image abroad."

Later, the acting JP chairman attended the biennial conference of the Chittagong city unit of Jatiya Juba Sanghati, the party's youth wing.

JP Chief HM Ershad could not attend the conference because of illness.

JP Secretary General Ruhul Amin Hawlader and lawmaker Golam Kibria Tipu, among others, were present.

Road accidents

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Chandra Sheel, 50.

The bodies were sent to the Tangail General hospital morgue for autopsy.

Locals and fire fighters rescued the injured passengers and rushed them to Mirzapur Kumudini Hospital. Of the injured, three were admitted there.

Abul Hossain, a passenger of the bus, told The Daily Star that the driver was drowsy when the accident occurred.

Previously, four people were killed and 15 injured when a stone-laden truck hit a standing bus at Mirzapur bypass on Dhaka-Tangail highway on Thursday.

Our correspondent from Gaibandha reports: eight people were killed and 27 sustained injuries in two separate accidents on Rangpur-Bogra highway in Gaibandha in the early hours yesterday.

In the first incident, a Dhaka bound night coach from Lalmonirhat banged full-speed into a roadside tree as the driver lost control of the wheels. After the collision, the coach fell in a ditch at Dhaperhat of Sadullapurinjuring all aboard.

Police said four passengers died on the spot while three unidentified others died on the way to the Rangpur Medical College Hospital. The deceased identified are Ismail, 65, Shamsul, 70, Belal, 38, and coach helper Babu Mia, 30. All the four were from Aditmari in Lalmonirhat district.

Among the 27 injured seven were in critical condition.

In another road mishap an unidentified man was run over by a speeding bus at Matherhat on Gaibandha-Palashbari road Friday morning.

Police could not trace out the bus yet. Two separate accident cases were filed with respective police stations.

Dhaka's move

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Senior officials of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), Coastguards, National Security Intelligence (NSI), and the police department will attend the meeting.

The home secretary said the home ministers of the two countries will be leading the JWG.

Asked how the committee will function, Home Minister Sahara Khatun told The Daily Star that they had not decided about how the JWG will work. "We will finalise the strategy for the joint working group first at the meeting, and then decide about its functioning," she said.

The main objectives of the JWGs will be sharing assessment of the international terrorism situation, to discuss ways to further advancing bilateral cooperation, and strengthening multilateral efforts in combating terrorism including through expanding and upgrading anti-terrorism training and capacity building in a number of areas, home ministry sources said.

There will be also strengthening of intelligence sharing, coordinated actions and deepening of investigative cooperation, promotion of cooperation in counter-terrorism related technology and equipment, and working together for the full and effective implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, which provides a comprehensive and mandatory framework for sustained global action against terrorism.

"The main goal of the joint working group is to enhance cooperation on counter-terrorism between the UK and Bangladesh," British High Commission Spokesperson Jon Ryan, who works on counter-terrorism, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The joint working groups will comprise inter-ministerial team of officials from the ministries of foreign affairs, home, and law enforcement and security agencies of respective countries.

Last year British Home Secretary Jacqui Smith pressed Bangladesh to improve the importance of a JWG for intensifying cooperation between

the two countries in combating international terrorism. She also said back then that the group will meet in June this year to thrash out details of practical programmes on counter-terrorism as she believes there are links between Bangladesh and British terror networks.

Earlier, at the first summit of Bimstec (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation) held in Bangkok in July 2004, a JWG was set up to coordinate efforts in areas such as intelligence sharing and capacity building to combat terrorism and transnational crimes.

DMC reopens

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Later on the day, the college authorities formed a 3-member probe committee to investigate the incident while BCL central leaders suspended organisational activities of the college unit.

Principal Din Mohammad said the probe body continues its investigation into the matter.

Returnees

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Overseas 22 months ago but the Malaysian employers did not get their work permits issued. They were temporarily employed in several places illegally and whatever wages they earned were taken away making their lives miserable in the foreign land.

In the name of work permits, their employer or agents took money from them but did nothing. The workers made repeated complaints to the Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur and even to the BMET but failed to get any solution.

They then stayed in a shelter house rented by Bangladesh High Commission and finally returned home Sunday.

Abdul Hannan said they spent over Tk 3 lakh each to go to Malaysia and return home. Besides they suffered immensely both physically and mentally and many fell ill in the last 22 months.

Cross-border crimes

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It mentioned that the price of a bottle of illicit narcotic, phensydid, had been around Tk 700 before the events in the BDR headquarters, the price of which nose dived to around Tk 350 since then, due to massive increase in inbound smuggling of the drug.

It also observed, "Since most of the members of different battalions of BDR were either directly or indirectly involved in the mutiny and lawlessness of February 25 and 26, so most of them are in a state of confusion and dilemma about their careers and future until the investigation is over. That is why, many of them are not playing an active role in guarding the borders and in curbing smuggling."

Quoting anonymous sources the report mentioned, "Keeping in mind the uncertainty of their future, some of them are even trying to ensure a future by getting themselves involved in cross-border smuggling."

The report, which was also sent to the Ministry of Homes Affairs, and Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), noted that many army officers deputed to BDR are carrying out their duties staying in nearest can-

tonments or circuit houses or rest houses, instead of staying at their command posts, feeling insecure.

The new BDR DG however said the officers are closely monitoring the situation by taking over their command positions, which he said boosted the morale of the jawans. "Now the situation at the borders is under our total control," Maj Gen Mainul said.

The security report advised the government to initiate coordinated efforts at the foreign and home affairs ministries levels with India and Myanmar to ensure meaningful security at the border areas. The report also advised the government for strengthening the activities of all internal law enforcement agencies in light of the border situation.

Bangladesh shares nearly 4,000 kilometres or 2,500 miles of land and maritime borders with its neighbours India and Myanmar.

The mutiny and the subsequent atrocities in the BDR headquarters of Pikhana in the capital left the paramilitary border force in a fragile state. A total of 76 persons including 54 army officers deputed to the force were killed by the mutineers.

Rajuk cashing

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"My banker wife borrowed Tk 1 lakh from her bank for a 5-katha plot under Purbachal project and for this every month we are giving Tk 7,000 to the bank for paying the loan money," said a public servant wishing anonymity.

Rajuk already have earned over Tk 15 crore through selling over 1.5 lakh forms (Tk 1,000 for each form), said an official at Rajuk.

Rajuk will earn around Tk 60 crore if they keep the deposited money (Tk 1,000 crore) for six months under FDR scheme of different banks on average 12 percent interest while it will be able to get Tk 25 crore as interest normally from STD account of a bank at five percent interest, said a banker of a private bank.

Rajuk is taking a deposit of Tk 75,000 for a 3-katha plot while Tk 1 lakh for a 5-katha, Tk 1.50 lakh for 7.5-katha and Tk 2 lakh for 10-katha plot under the two projects.

Obama seeks \$83.4b more for Iraq, Afghanistan

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama has formally asked lawmakers for another \$83.4 billion dollars to pay for the immediate needs of his revamped strategy for Afghanistan and for the war in Iraq.

In a letter to his top Democratic ally in the House of Representatives, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Obama pleaded Thursday for swift passage of the emergency spending measure, citing the worsening situation in Afghanistan.

"We face a security situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan that demands urgent attention. The Taliban is resurgent and al-Qaeda threatens America from its safe haven along the Afghan-Pakistan border," he said.

"With that reality as my focus, today I send to the Congress a supplemental appropriations request totaling \$83.4 billion dollars that will fund our ongoing military, diplomatic, and intelligence operations," said the president.

The package includes items not related to the two conflicts, including 350 million dollars for security and counter-narcotics work along the US-Mexico border and 89.5 million dollars for efforts to secure Russian nuclear materials and pursue disablement and dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear work.

Home minister

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the decision to free the land occupied illegally by Khaleda.

The Home Minister urged Khaleda to vacate the house abiding by the government decision. "People will appreciate you if you do it," she said advising the opposition to shun the path of anarchy.

BNP strategy

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to form convening committees soon to hold councils at the district level.

Meanwhile, BNP holds rallies at district and upazila headquarters today to denounce the cabinet's decision.

Some of its senior leaders, who are lawyers, have already been laying the groundwork to challenge the legality of the government move.

A committee has been formed with former law minister Moudud Ahmed at the helm to oversee the legal measures to be taken.

Speaking to reporters at his Armanitola house in the city, Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain said since the government took the decision on political consideration, BNP will face it politically.

But if necessary, it will contest the matter in courts as well.

Delwar said that if the decision is not withdrawn immediately, the government will have to shoulder the blame for any situation that might arise.

"Why the Mainul Road residence when it [government] has vast tract of land elsewhere to construct flats for the families of the army officers massacred at Pikhana?" he asked, referring to the rationale stated for cancelling the allotment of Khaleda's house.

On Thursday night, a senior BNP leader told The Daily Star that after weighing every aspect of the issue they had settled on legal recourse. They would move to courts as soon as the government starts procedure to evict the former prime minister from her house.

Asked about the prospect of continuous demonstrations against the government, he said, "It's true our organisational strength has diminished due to the caretaker government's discrimination against us. Still, we are hopeful we'll get public support strong enough to force the government to cancel its decision."

Insiders say the leaders who are known for corruption and controversy are more interested in launching a movement right now. They want so as they fear losing their place if the party is reorganised.

"Before waging a movement, the party should decide on the fate of the leaders who are responsible for the crisis confronting us," a leader told The Daily Star during a rally in front of the BNP headquarters on Thursday.

US-led forces kill 32 Afghan militants

6 policemen die in Taliban attack

AFP, Kabul

The US military said yesterday that forces under its command killed 32 militants in overnight battles and air strikes across southern Afghanistan, the main battlefield in the Taliban-led insurgency.

One of battles erupted in the province of Helmand when insurgents attacked a patrol of Afghan and US-led coalition troops Thursday, a statement said.

"The friendly forces responded with small-arms fire, heavy weapons and close-air support, resulting in the deaths of 15 enemies of Afghanistan," it said in a statement.

The fighting happened near the provincial capital Lashkar Gah where Afghan authorities also reported heavy fighting overnight, claiming that 36 Taliban were killed although they had the bodies of only seven.

Another US military statement said a dozen more insurgents were killed in Uruzgan province after another attack on an Afghan and coalition patrol.

"The combined force responded with small-arms, rocket-propelled grenade and close-air support fire, killing 12 insurgents," it said.

Also Thursday, Afghan and coalition forces killed five "combatants" in Kandahar province's Maywand district, an earlier statement said.

The troops raided a cell "directly linked" to a suicide attack that killed four Afghan civilians and a coalition forces member in January, it said.

The force could not immediately confirm exactly to which attack it was referring.

A suicide attack in the district killed two US soldiers and two Afghans on January 8, but there was a rash of attacks that month, when 25 international soldiers lost their lives

2 murdered

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yesterday. They sent the body to Sir Salimullah Medical College morgue for autopsy.

Adil's brother-in-law Anisur Rahman told The Daily Star that one unidentified person called Adil over telephone around 10:30pm Thursday. Adil went out receiving the call and had been missing since. Police could not recover Adil's cellphone.

Shahbagh police recovered the body of the unidentified man in front of Dhaka Medical College Hospital emergency gate early yesterday. He was shot in the back.

DMCH sources said he was tossed from a moving CNG-run auto-rickshaw in front of the hospital around 12:15am.

Pakistan: Security

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meeting between school staff and council officials agreed to install special gates and CCTV cameras at entry and exit points of schools, and to control traffic outside the buildings.

"There is a high alert," senior police officer Nematullah Kundi told AFP.

"We have stepped up security in the city, in and around the diplomatic enclave and the area near the parliament building, which is the declared Red Zone," he said.

"Extra guards have also been deployed at schools in the Red Zone and elsewhere in the city," said the officer, who deals with security in Islamabad.

Television footage showed police vehicles dropping concrete slabs on major roads to block the entry of any suspicious vehicles into the Red Zone.

Special walk-through gates have been installed at key government buildings where visitors are scanned before allowing them entry, they said.

Meanwhile, Suspected Taliban militants planted a bomb in northwest Pakistan that destroyed six tankers supplying fuel to Nato troops in neighbouring Afghanistan, officials said Friday.

Around 35 tankers were parked overnight at the Chamkani area, outside Peshawar, when militants placed a bomb under one of the vehicles loaded with diesel, petrol and aviation fuel, police official Asmatullah Khan told AFP.

The blast triggered a fire, which spread to another five tankers, he said, adding that the blaze was only brought under control by Pakistan air force vehicles after local firefighters failed to tame the flames.

"They used a special chemical to extinguish the fire," a security official said on condition of anonymity. The oil tankers, contracted to supply Nato forces, had been parked

in Afghanistan. In 1996 the Taliban rose from Kandahar to sweep into government in Kabul. They were ousted in a US-led invasion in late 2001 that sent many of their leaders and their allies in al-Qaeda into sanctuaries across in Pakistan.

Earlier Taliban insurgents attacked a police post in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province Friday, killing six policemen and wounding another seven, the provincial government said.

India to hold biggest auction of oil, gas blocks

AFP, New Delhi

India has announced the launch of its biggest-ever auction of oil and gas areas, brushing aside worries about a drop in spending by firms on energy exploration due to the global financial crisis.

The government expects to attract three billion dollars in commitments for exploration, a senior government official said late Thursday.

India is offering 70 blocks in the eighth round of the New Exploration Licensing Policy (NELP), Petroleum Secretary R.S. Pandey said.

Some 24 deep-sea blocks, 28 shallow water blocks and 18 on-land blocks are up for grabs.

New Delhi is also accepting bids for 10 areas for extraction of gas trapped in coal seams known as coal bed methane (CBM).

India, which imports three quarters of its crude needs, has increased exploration of natural resources in a bid to ease its reliance on imports.

The auction comes despite the worldwide economic slump and a fall in fuel prices, which has reduced exploration spending.

Asked if the government was worried the economic slowdown would affect interest in the auction, Pandey said: "In our mind, the most effective antidote for the meltdown is the generation of economic activity."

However, global spending on oil and gas exploration may drop 12 percent in 2009 to 400 billion dollars, Barclays Capital Research warned in a recent research note.

India received bids for 45 of the 57 areas on offer in the seventh round last year when crude prices were near all-time highs.

in an unauthorised area, the official said.

Attacks by extremists who are outraged that Pakistan joined the US-led "war on terror" have killed more than 1,700 people across the country since government forces besieged a radical mosque in Islamabad in July 2007.

The United States has put the nuclear-armed Muslim nation at the heart of efforts to defeat al-Qaeda.

Much of the violence has been concentrated in north-west Pakistan, where the army has been fighting hardline Taliban and al-Qaeda extremists.

Fake notes

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the hotel in the afternoon. Suspecting them as criminals, one of the employees shut the collapsible gate to prevent them from leaving the hotel."

When the plain-clothes Rab members found the gate closed, they got angry and beat up Palash, who was at the hotel counter.

"I told them that I am the nephew of the home minister but they assaulted me again," Palash said.

"Amisunderstanding led to the assault on Palash," a senior Rab official told The Daily Star wishing anonymity.

6 more BDR

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Abdul Kabir Akand of CID said all the 15 BDR jawans were arrested at Pikhana for their alleged involvement in the bloodbath.

With yesterday's arrest, the number of arrestees rose to 1028 while 31 of them made confessional statements.

Besides, 190 BDR members so far have been placed on remand in connection with the Pikhana carnage that left 75 people killed, including 57 Army personnel.