

UN criticises Israel for attacks on Gaza

AP, Jerusalem

A new United Nations report criticises Israel for attacking UN installations during the Gaza campaign, according to an Israeli description Tuesday of the still unreleased document, which it called "tendentious and entirely unbalanced."

The report, commissioned by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, was expected to be presented to the Security Council later Tuesday, Foreign Ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor said. Government officials said a copy was provided to Israel for comment, but would not provide the

report.

The material Israel presented to the UN commission investigating strikes on UN institutions in Gaza was largely ignored in the final report, Palmor said, and no blame was placed on the Hamas militants Israel says were using the UN compounds for cover during the fighting.

"The spirit of the report and its language are tendentious and entirely unbalanced and ignore the facts as they were presented to the commission," the Foreign Ministry said in an official statement. "The commission prefers the

positions of Hamas, a murderous terror organization, and by doing so misleads the world public."

A UN spokesman in Jerusalem would not comment. The UN's New York offices were closed and officials there unavailable for comment.

Israel launched the offensive in Gaza on Dec. 27 to weaken Gaza's Hamas government and end days of rocket attacks by the Islamic militant group. During the three-week operation, Israeli attacks struck several U.N. compounds, including the organization's Gaza headquarters.

In one strike near a U.N. school more than 40 people were killed, according to Gaza officials. At the time, witnesses told The Associated Press that militants had fired from the area.

Ban, who called the attacks on U.N. buildings "outrageous," commissioned the investigation in February, shortly after the fighting ended. Israel said it did not intentionally strike the compounds, but was forced to act against militants using the U.N. buildings and other civilian areas for cover.

Concerned about the emerging report, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor

Lieberman spoke with Ban over the weekend and the Foreign Ministry's director-general flew to New York on Monday for the same reason, government officials said.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because the diplomatic efforts were not publicly announced.

The three-week war killed some 1,400 Palestinians, most of them civilians, according to Gaza health officials and human rights groups. Israel says the number was lower and a majority of the dead were militants.

Thirteen Israelis were killed.

Strip Sircar of MP status

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to 16 last year, and submitted a medical bill of Tk 1.21 lakh on returning home, and withdrew the money. "It's cheating," said the probe body.

Sircar, Akhtar and Delwar, none of them carried with them necessary foreign currencies to meet their medical expenditures, it said.

No medical board made any recommendation for Delwar's medical treatment abroad, who is now the BNP secretary general, said the probe report.

"They cleared their medical bills in foreign currencies unlawfully. After medical treatment, they took the money from the Parliament Secretariat. They committed offences, which are punishable under the money laundering act," the sub-committee said, suggesting taking of actions against the accused under the money laundering act.

Talking to The Daily Star on Monday, Awami League lawmaker Brig Gen (retd) SK Abu Bakr, who is also the chief of the sub-committee, said the accused carried Bangladeshi currencies with them, but they cleared their medical bills in dollars. "It's an offence under the money laundering act," Bakr said.

Former speaker Sircar

wasted public money by clearing all medical bills unlawfully and by abusing his power, and it is a massive corruption, the report added.

The accused thus however gave undertakings that they will return the money if it is found that they had no entitlement to the money.

The sub-committee also accused Sircar, Akhtar and Delwar of contempt of the parliament, and recommended taking actions against them, as they defied the committee's written request to submit their reports to it.

"We will sit on May 14 to fix the date for summoning them before the committee," Advocate Fazle Rabbi Mia, chief of the main all-party probe committee, told reporters emerging from a committee meeting in the parliament building yesterday.

"We will give them scopes to defend themselves. We don't want to take any decision before hearing them out," Rabbi said.

Another parliamentary sub-committee led by Jatiya Party lawmaker Mujib-ur-Haque also submitted its probe report on recruitment of 256 staffs for the Parliament Secretariat. The sub-committee found that the

former speaker appointed them violating relevant laws, committee sources said.

The all-party main committee however did not disclose the findings of the report and decided to discuss those at the next meeting.

It also decided to summon six senior officials to its next meeting on May 14, who were involved in the recruitment process during the tenure of the immediate past speaker Sircar.

Another sub-committee led by AL lawmaker Shajahan Khan, probing alleged corruption in procurement and spending for agriculture, will submit its report at the next meeting, Rabbi said.

That sub-committee already brought allegations of misappropriation of around Tk 2 crore in the name of agriculture.

Formed by Speaker Abdul Hamid in the inaugural session of the ninth parliament, the all-party main probe committee began probing the alleged corruption of Sircar, who was the speaker for the last seven years; and formed three sub-committees to expedite the investigation.

After discussing the findings of the sub-committees, the main committee will submit its report to the House

in its next session, which will begin in early June.

The probe bodies already disclosed widespread allegation of corruption. According to the information disclosed by the probe bodies, Sircar took Tk 12 lakh to purchase furniture for his official residence, ignoring rules that allow him to spend only Tk 1.5 lakh.

And the Parliament Secretariat could not even find most of the furniture following the former speaker's departure from the official residence.

Sircar, who had failed to win any seat in the parliament through the December 29, 2008 general election and later managed to win one through the by-election on April 2, had spent Tk 27 lakh to buy stationery for the parliament in FY 2007-'08, although the parliament did not exist during that period.

He spent Tk 5.51 lakh in entertainment purposes in only three months of FY 2006-'07. He also received Tk 1 lakh every year for agriculture in his official residence.

The probe disclosures also said Delwar took away government properties that had been given to him for use during his stay at the Nam flats as an MP during the last parliament.

The items he took away include a number of furniture

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Ahsanul Karim yesterday told The Daily Star that there is no legal bar to his client's release following the HC bail order.

The SC on March 3 rejected Babar's petition seeking extension of his bail and also directed him to surrender.

On March 5 this year, a Dhaka court sent Babar to jail after he surrendered and sought bail in this case, as the HC earlier on March 4 directed him to surrender before the trial court as per the Supreme Court (SC) order.

On October 16 last year, the HC granted Babar a six-month bail on health grounds following a pending appeal against the trial court verdict on October 30, 2007.

But the SC on October 23 modified the HC order and curtailed his bail for three months and directed him to surrender within the time.

Babar, wanted in a number of cases including corruption, extortion and bribery, was released on bail on December 4, 2008.

On October 30, Dhaka Metropolitan Special Tribunal-9 sentenced Babar to 17 years' rigorous imprisonment for possessing illegal arms and ammunition.

Webbys Awards for NY Times, Boston Globe, Guardian, BBC

AP, Washington

The New York Times, the endangered Boston Globe, Britain's Guardian and the BBC scooped up Webbys Awards for online excellence yesterday.

The Economist, National Public Radio (NPR) and The Huffington Post were also among the media outlets whose online efforts were rewarded by the 600-member International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences.

NYTimes.com picked up Webbys for best writing and best practices but gave up the title it won last year as best newspaper website to the Guardian, which won for the fourth time in five years.

The BBC won Webbys for best news site and in the lifestyle category for its climate change site Bloom.

The Economist won Webbys for best writing and best practices but gave up the title it won last year as best newspaper website to the Guardian, which won for the fourth time in five years.

The Guardian also won

Webbys for best podcasts and another in the religion and spirituality category.

The Boston Globe, which is facing a shutdown threat by its owner, The New York Times Co., won a Webby Award for best use of photography.

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The New York Times, Guardian, BBC and NPR also won People's Voice awards in several categories. The People's Voice awards are decided through an online vote by the public.

The academy also handed out special achievement awards, naming singer Trent Reznor "Webby Artist of the Year" for making his album, The Slip, available for free download on his website.

site Flickr, which won the online community award, Mint.com for financial services and Digg for social networking.

The Onion won in the humor category and ESPN for sports.

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MRP job goes to armed forces

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immigration official.

"The army has the experience and the ability to prepare national identity cards (NID). The government has decided to involve them in introducing the MRP and use local expertise," Abdur Rob Hawlader, director general (DG) of the Department of Immigration and Passport, told The Daily Star yesterday.

However, frequent changes of mind of the government about the project have threatened the possibility of meeting the April 2010 deadline to introduce MRP. Experts say that with the latest developments, the chances of meeting the deadline look even bleaker.

Considering that an efficient international firm with sufficient experience and knowledge about MRP is required for the project, the government is not considering the German HJP Consulting Firm. Instead the policymakers decided to use local experts. "If necessary we will seek cooperation from international firms," he added.

The authorities concerned are hopeful about meeting the MRP deadline. "We are hoping to start the project in full swing in July," said the DG, denying that any influential quarter was behind the government move.

Asked whether the MRP would be acceptable to the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), he said if the army with local experts can prepare the MRP maintaining international standards then it would be acceptable to the ICAO.

Sources in the home ministry and the passport office, however, said an influential quarter emerged after the AL government assumed power and they were behind this sudden move of the government.

They said a group, like that of the previous BNP-led government, is out to financial benefit from the Tk 283 crore project, which was first initiated by the previous Awami League (AL) government in 1998.

A home ministry official involved in the MRP project said the army's "success" in preparing NID was shown as the reason behind giving this important project to them.

"The fact is that the influential quarter strongly lobbied

who sought over Tk 750 crore for it.

Babar undertook the scheme without the ECNEC approval. The then cabinet also did not approve the project as it had various legal issues and also because the home ministry failed to give a breakdown of the project cost.

At present, 1.5 crore people of the country have passports and 12 lakh new passports are issued annually.

Of the 181 member nations of the ICAO, 115 including India and Pakistan have so far issued MRPs to their citizens.

Bangladesh is a member of the ICAO, a global forum for civil aviation and a specialised United Nations agency that codifies principles and techniques of international aviation and fosters the planning and development of international air transport.

With Bangladesh yet to introduce MRP, it has no preparation as yet to meet another deadline of 2014 for issuing e-passport, a combined paper and electronic identity document that uses biometrics to authenticate the identity of travellers.

Since the MRP would not be applicable for international travel after 2014, many fear the fund to be spent for MRP would be wasted.

Bangladesh citizens' access to international manpower markets and all types of visas would be at risk if the government fails to introduce the MRP by April 2010.

The budget of Tk 283 crore for MRP is in stark contrast to a failed scheme spearheaded in 2006 by the then state minister for Home Affairs Tanjim Ahmed Sohel Taj told The Daily Star two weeks ago.

ডিউটি ফ্রি অপারেশনস

৮৩-৮৮, মহাখালী বাএ, ঢাকা-১২১২।

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