

Swat peace deal

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The deadly attack came on the eve of President Asif Ali Zardari's first face-to-face talks with US counterpart Barack Obama, with Washington concerned that emboldened militants are threatening Pakistan's very existence.

The bomber ploughed a car packed with explosives into the back of a paramilitary jeep at a checkpoint near Bara, where the northwest city of Peshawar runs into the Taliban and al-Qaeda-infested tribal area of Khyber.

Rescue workers picked charred bodies out of the wreckage, as police and hospital officials said four civilians and a paramilitary soldier were killed.

Police said 21 people were also wounded, including several children who were waiting for a van to take them to school.

"As the vehicle stopped at a police checkpoint the bomber hit his explosive-laden car from behind," police officer Abdul Ghafoor said.

There was no claim for the attack but Pakistan's paramilitary are locked in a fierce offensive in the northwest against Taliban bitterly opposed to the government's cooperation with the United States in the "war on terror".

Zardari is in the United States preparing for talks with Obama on Wednesday, hoping to secure a massive US aid package to better equip the military and boost development in his cash-strapped nuclear-armed country.

His weak civilian government is under US pressure to crush militants in the northwest, where Washington says al-Qaeda, Taliban and other Islamists pose the biggest terror threat to the West and an "existential threat" to Pakistan.

The White House talks, which also involve Afghan President Hamid Karzai, are part of a sweeping new US strategy designed to defeat militants threatening the governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Zardari's administration came under fierce criticism at home and abroad for ratifying a February agreement with an Islamist cleric to put three million people in the northwest under Sharia law in a bid to end a Taliban uprising.

Frightened residents fled suburban areas in the main town of Swat, where the Taliban concentrated a two-year insurgency, after the army issued an evacuation order that ignited fears of an imminent new offensive, witnesses said.

The military ordered four neighbourhoods on the edge of Mingora to evacuate and announced a break in an indefinite curfew for the displaced to flee to a special camp as bullets rattled through parts of Mingora.

With the havadar's death yesterday, the number of border guards who died in the capital and elsewhere since March 9 stands at 20.

Of them, four committed suicide, seven died of heart attack and nine of other diseases, according to the BDR authorities.

Congress turns

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Congress's star campaigner touted as a future premier, told a news conference in the national capital New Delhi, one of the battlegrounds in Thursday's voting.

Rahul Gandhi, 38, a descendant of the Nehru-Gandhi lineage, which has given India three prime ministers, said there was a large amount of common ground with the Left and Congress on income distribution, health and education.

But he added that "there is absolutely no meeting ground" with the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), branding the Hindu nationalist "totally finished".

India's elections in recent years have traditionally been followed by intense horse-trading to form a government.

BJP spokesman Rajiv Pratap Rudy, meanwhile, objected strongly to Gandhi's claim that the party was doomed, saying that Congress would "emerge as a political debris post elections, scavenging for survival".

The Left, for its part, spurned Gandhi's overtures. "This is an election play. They know they are not going to get the numbers and they're nervous," said Communist Party of India general secretary AB Bardhan.

"I don't think the Left will oblige them this time," he said.

The communists are angling for a secular, non-Congress government -- a so-called "Third Front" -- to come to power.

Rahul Gandhi insisted

Local residents said "large numbers" were leaving in panic, weighed down with whatever belongings they could carry on foot, waiting at bus stations or driving away in private cars, although the military withdrew the order.

"We have now suspended this order and people are directed not to vacate their homes because the government has no immediate plan to launch an operation in these areas," said local military spokesman Major Nasir Khan.

A government official said five people died overnight in crossfire between militants and security forces in Swat, where a once-thriving tourist industry has been decimated by the brutal Taliban insurgency seeking to impose Sharia law.

The violence broke out with the government and Islamist hardliners at loggerheads over an Islamic appeals court -- which the Taliban demanded under the peace agreement but rejected for being created without proper consultation.

The military has also been fighting hundreds of armed Taliban who thrust further south and east out of Swat into the districts of Lower Dir and Buner.

Late Monday, top US senators unveiled plans to expand and overhaul civilian US aid to Pakistan, calling it an urgent step to help defeat Islamists who threaten the nuclear-armed ally's stability.

But the US national security adviser, General James Jones, told the BBC that Washington needed further guarantees about the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, despite reassurances that the weapons are out of Taliban reach.

War tribunals

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corruption allegations against officials and employees of private companies was dropped to ensure transparency of the ACC, he said.

He said the cabinet has approved the proposal in principle and it would be tabled as a bill before the parliament and sent to the parliamentary standing committee for examination.

About the new chairman of ACC, Shafique said Golam Rahman is an honest man and hoped that the ACC would be stronger under his leadership.

The government will assist the ACC so that it can work independently under its own laws, the law minister said, adding that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has also warned against harassing innocent people and abusing the ACC's powers.

Replying to a query, he said the ACC can withdraw cases, which were filed for 'political harassment'.

About the cases filed against BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and her sons Tarique Rahman and Arafat Rahman Koko, the minister said "It's not the question of any individual. Those who will feel that their cases are political can apply for withdrawing those cases."

Shafique Ahmed, however, said all the cases were not filed with political motives.

"The cases which have merit and evidence should continue and genuine political cases should be withdrawn," he added.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh would be the party's candidate for premier if it gets a mandate to form the government.

"Manmohan Singh is the best prime minister the country can have," he said.

But Singh has become a hurdle to Congress's hopes of forming a government because of hostility from the communists who withdrew their support from the ruling coalition last year to protest the signing of a nuclear pact with the United States.

Media reports have suggested Congress may be forced to ditch Singh, 76, a Gandhi family loyalist, if he proves too much of a liability.

Analysts also say deal-making appears set to eclipse ideology in forming the government.

"Past commitments, positions or loyalties seem to count for very little," said Subhash Agrawal, editor of India Focus, a political analysis and forecasting report.

"It still looks like the Congress may just about return to power by the skin of its teeth, but only after negotiating hard and after compromising heavily with Left parties," he added.

If Singh returns as prime minister, he's expected to step aside for Rahul Gandhi midway through his term, many observers say.

Analysts say the elections may throw up an unstable coalition that could mean fresh polls within a couple of years.

Rahul could then emerge as the "fresh young face" of Congress, they say.

Camel jockeys

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the district administration concerned. The ill-fated children are going to get this compensation for their rehabilitation as per a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between the governments of Bangladesh and the UAE on April 25, 2007.

"This money will help their rehabilitation," said Sahara at a press briefing following a meeting on 'camel jockeys' compensation programme.

Hundreds of ill-fated children were trafficked to the UAE till 2005. They were tied up on the back of the camels during races as it was traditionally believed that the more frightened children scream, the faster the camels run.

Many children received permanent injuries due to this brutal game of the UAE people. The Gulf nation banned the race in 2005 following persuasion by the UNICEF, movements by rights organisations and protests by the Bangladesh government.

All the victims, now below 18 years, from 29 districts would get the compensation depending on the types of physical or psychological damage they had suffered.

A joint board of the home ministries of Bangladesh and the UAE interviewed 700 claimants to fix the sum of compensation.

State Minister for Home Affairs Sohel Taj said no children from Bangladesh are now being used as camel jockeys.

"Nothing can compensate the damage of those ill-fated children," he commented.

Now the UAE race lovers use a kind of robots instead of minor children tied up on the hunch of the camels.

Lt Col Ibrahim Al Marzooki, Abdullah Mubarak Al Mahiri, Lt Mohammad Awad Al Karim and Abu Obaidou Nouman attended the 'camel jockeys' compensation programme' held at the home ministry.

Miners run

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between the two groups who were armed with bamboo sticks.

Sources said miners beat up two people during the clash. The wounded were identified as Md Sadequ Islam and Ramzan Ali, truck drivers of coal buyers, locals said.

The agitating miners then entered the administrative building of BCMCL and assaulted Petrobangla officials there. They also vandalised toilets, air conditioning units, furniture, the CMC canteen and smashed windowpanes, BCMCL officials claimed.

Phulbari police went to the spot and got the situation under control.

Md Mir Abdul Moteen, general manager (mining), said they would go for legal action against the perpetrators. He also said coal extraction was suspended soon after the incident and it resumed yesterday evening.

However, the convener and general secretary of the miners association told The Daily Star last night that the mine resumed operations around three in the afternoon after all their arrears wages were paid in full.

They, however, claimed that victims of the land subsidence around the mine swooped on the officials and attacked the CMC building and the coalminers had nothing to do with yesterday's incident.

On Monday, land subsidence victims of the mine area held a rally in front of the coalmine gate demanding compensation for the losses they incurred. Sources said at least 1,000 people of 10 villages surrounding the mine joined therally.

The protesters issued a 10-day ultimatum to the authorities for compensation to damages to their land and homes.

Essentials import

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under control, especially during the next Ramadan.

The commodities are crude and refined edible oil, gram, pulses, peas, onion, spices and dates.

The Bangladesh Bank circular has also advised the commercial banks to keep the fixed charge, fees and commission at a logical level in case of importing these commodities.

In last two days, the prices of these commodities were going up. According to a TCB report, soybean oil price shot up by about 7 per cent yesterday over the price a month back. The price of palm oil increased by 27 per cent during the period.

Lentil price increased by about 12 per cent while the price of onion fell yesterday.

However, the prices mentioned by the TCB did not match with market price. The TCB quoted price of imported onion at Tk 15 and the local variety at Tk 24 per kg. But on a visit to markets The Daily Star correspondent found that imported onion was selling at Tk 20 while the local variety at Tk 28 per kg.

To bring down the price of edible oil, the commerce minister held several rounds of meetings with the businessmen but the attempt failed.

Bangladesh Bank sources said they have fixed the interest rate and other charges so that the import cost remains low. The central bank will also monitor it, sources added.

11 Hasina cases

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The then AL-led government, sent his recommendations on nine cases to the district magistrate yesterday and the day before, said officials at the PP's office.

The magistrate will now forward those to the home ministry.

Earlier last week, the law officer suggested that the Meghnath power plant and Bepra graft cases against the AL president be dismissed as those were filed by the last BNP-led alliance government for "political harassment".

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Abdullah Abu said the cases he thinks should be dismissed include two graft cases filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) during the caretaker government's rule.

Of the two, one deals with 'corruption' in awarding contracts for setting up barge-mounted power plants and the other concerns 'graft' in giving gas exploration deal to Canadian company Niko.

Also among the cases suggested for withdrawal are those filed by the last BNP government for graft in purchase of MIG-29s for the air force and Frigate for the navy, and construction of Bangabandhu Planetarium (now Bhashani Novo Theatre), and illegal entry in the cantonment area to visit the now deceased writer Humayun Azad at the CMH.

"The BNP-Jamaat government filed the cases against Sheikh Hasina to undermine her government's success, tarnish her image at home and abroad, and to harass her politically," the PP wrote to the district magistrate, giving his views on the Frigate graft case.

The home ministry, in turn, will place the petition before the law ministry's high-powered committee to decide whether the law officer should move to have the case quashed.

On nod from the government, the PP will file a petition with the court concerned for withdrawal of the case.

Whether a case should be quashed however is at the court's discretion.

Padma Bridge

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Hasina, also the president of ruling Awami League, already wrote a letter to the Chinese premier seeking the assistance.

According to the government plan, it will soon engage officials to prepare for starting the construction of the second Padma Bridge or the Patuaria-Daulatia Tunnel, once it gets confirmation of the fund.

Construction of a bridge on the River Padma was one of the top electoral pledges of Awami League.

The communications minister recently visited China and met Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao seeking financial assistance for implementing five priority projects, which also include construction of a tunnel under the River Kamaphuli, a railway line from Chittagong to Gundum in Myanmar via Cox's Bazar, and construction of the seventh China-Bangladesh Friendship Bridge on the River Arikhkan at Kajirtek of Madaripur.

"These above mentioned projects will help the present government build a strong foundation of a modern

Bangladesh, capable of withstanding the untenable effects of the global economic slowdown, and to contribute to the strengthening and consolidating of the friendly relations between our two countries and peoples," the minister stated in his letter to the Chinese prime minister.

Currently there are pending Bangladesh government projects worth 900 million US dollars, for which the Chinese government had earlier promised to provide fund, said government officials. There are at least four projects waiting for promised Chinese fund under different ministries including telecommunications, and power and energy, according to official sources.

Asked about the pending projects and the promise of some new assistance Syed Abul Hossain said, "It will be easy to get the new assistance once the pending projects are implemented."

"If we get the fund, we can start construction of both Padma bridges simultaneously," Hossain said.

Clock may go 1hr

FROM PAGE 1
energy and mineral resources ministry at the secretariat yesterday to know opinions of different ministries about the proposal to introduce DST to conserve electricity by maximum use of daylight.

As per the proposal, the daylight saving system will be applied in the country from June 16 and continue up to September 30 this year.

"A consensus was made to advance the daytime by an hour from June 16," State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Shamsul Haque Tuku told reporters after the meeting.

"We gave the proposal and sought opinions of different ministries," he headed.

Representatives of the planning, industry, labour and manpower, foreign affairs, telecommunications, health, establishment, information, law, shipping, civil aviation and tourism, and education ministries responded in favour of the daylight saving proposal.

The meeting, however, left the matter for the cabinet to decide. If the cabinet does not approve, the DST will not be introduced this year -- it will be introduced from April 1, 2010.

Following a move by Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission in the wake of nagging power crisis in recent months, the power and energy ministry decided to introduce DST to ensure maximum use of daylight and save electricity.

Tuku said they would take opinions of all ministries before placing the proposal before the cabinet. "If the proposal is approved, all will have to put forward their

Jubok housing

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Officer-in-charge (OC) of Dhanmondi Police Station Shah Alam told The Daily Star that Lokman was arrested around 3:30am following a cheating and misappropriation case filed by Ashraf Hossain on March 22 and another misappropriation case by Abul Hossain filed with the police station.

He said complainant Ashraf, a client of Jubok Housing, stated in his case statement that Lokman misappropriated Tk 30 lakh, deposited by his wife, in the name of selling a plot of land to her while complainant Abul Hossain stated misappropriation of Tk 19.65 lakh that he deposited.

The OC said Lokman is accused in over 50 cases with several police stations across the country including Paltan, Sutrapur, Dhanmondi, Mirpur and Motijheel police stations in the capital.

Court sources said police prayed for seven days' remand in each case but the court granted two days in Ashraf case and five days in Abul Hossain case.

Meanwhile, Lokman's employees tried to snatch him from police custody at the court compound when he was about to be produced at the court. But police foiled the attempt. During the attempt they damaged a camera of a private television channel, Channel 1.

Hundreds of cheated clients thronged the Dhanmondi Police Station as soon as the news of his arrest spread. They demanded reimbursement of their money and exemplary punishment of such fraud.

Victims gathered at the police station said they were lured into making deposits for high interest but after a certain period the Jubok authorities gave evasive reply without giving interest of the sum itself.

They added that when they asked Jubok to return the money, the authorities offered them plots instead. However, they failed to provide land with proper documents.

Jubok Housing is a sister concern of Jubo Kormasangshan Society (Jubok).

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Swine flu

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heralding something else coming along," said John Oxford, a top virologist at St. Bartholomew's and the Royal London Hospital.

"It is disconcerting that in 1918 there was a summer outbreak that was fairly mild. It should have been a warning for the big wave, that came in the fall and winter," he told AFP by phone.

The new strain of virus emerged in Mexico, where it has infected nearly 800 people and killed 26, according to government figures.

Worldwide, the swine flu has spread to 21 countries on four continents, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

But even as Mexico City planned to ease a health emergency that has paralysed the capital for five days, a top health official there warned that a resurgence in winter was "predictable." WHO chief Margaret Chan, meanwhile, said the flu could return "with a vengeance."

"1889, 1918, 1957 and 1968

Nepali parties

FROM PAGE 1
Congress party leader Ram Sharan Mahat told the BBC.

UML leader Jhala Nath Khanal said that the Maoists "gave us the offer to lead the government and we have agreed".

Earlier Nepal President urged the political parties to form a new government within the next five days.

In a letter furnished to the parliament secretary, Dr. Yadav asked the parties to form the government with consensus among political parties represented at the Constituent Assembly within Saturday.

Political parties have begun their discussion to form a new coalition government day after Dahal resigned.

Constituent Assembly members of the Unified CPN (Maoist) have decided not to allow any business of the parliament until Dr. Yadav apologises for his move to "reinstate" the army chief before the House.

Maoist cadres have organised rallies and demonstrations in various parts of the country demanding the withdrawal of the President's move.

Police have arrested dozens of civil society activists from a sit-in programme in front of the Presidential palace, Shital Niwas.

However, the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-m