



Palestinian security forces inspect damages inside a house following a deadly shootout between Palestinian policemen and Hamas gunmen in the West Bank town of Qalqiliya yesterday. Six people were killed in the shootout when an attempt to arrest a senior Hamas commander went awry, deepening the rift between the two main Palestinian factions.

6 killed as Hamas men clash with Palestinian cops

AP, Qalqiliya

Top Hamas fugitives lobbed grenades and fired automatic weapons yesterday to push back Palestinian security forces storming their hideout, leaving six dead in the bloodiest clash since the Palestinian president launched a crackdown on Hamas in the West Bank two years ago.

Two top Hamas militants on the run from Israel for years were among those killed, along with an unarmed Hamas supporter and three Palestinian policemen.

After the hours-long battle, hundreds of spent bullet casings, puddles of blood and tear gas canisters were visible at the hideout, a two-story building in the northern West Bank town of Qalqiliya. Parts of the walls were burned down.

The Islamic militant Hamas immediately hurled angry accusations at the Western-backed president, Mahmoud Abbas, accusing him of betraying Palestinians resisting Israeli occupation and threatening revenge. Relations have

been sour since Hamas seized Gaza by force two years ago, leaving Abbas only in control of the West Bank.

The arrest raid underscored Abbas' determination to rein in militants as part of his obligations under the US-backed "road map" peace plan.

The shootout came just three days after Abbas met at the White House with President Barack Obama and renewed a pledge to honour these commitments. The US has been training Abbas' elite forces to help him affirm his control of the West Bank and prepare for eventual statehood.

Despite Hamas' threats of reprisals, it was not immediately clear whether it would change its tactic of lying low in the West Bank while it weathers Abbas' crackdown. Since Hamas' Gaza takeover, Abbas' security forces have detained hundreds of Hamas supporters in the West Bank and closed the group's institutions and charities.

The Qalqiliya clash began late Saturday when Palestinian troops surrounded a hideout of Mohammed Samman, a leader of Hamas' military

wing, Izzedine al-Qassam, and his assistant, Mohammed Yassin. Both had been on Israel's wanted list for six years, Palestinian security officials said.

Initially, about two dozen officers stormed the house, breaking down the door, said a policeman who had participated in the raid, but spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to reporters. The Hamas men lobbed a grenade and opened automatic fire, killing three officers and wounding two critically, he said. Other officers fled, then brought in reinforcements.

The ensuing battle lasted until mid-morning Sunday. Police say they found bombs, suicide belts and bullets in their search of the house.

Qalqiliya, which elected a Hamas mayor several years ago, was tense Monday. Women gathered near the scene heaped insults on policemen. Sporadic gunfire erupted in other areas of town, and police said the shots came from Hamas loyalists targeting officers, though there were no reports of injuries.

ICRC 'gravely concerned' at Swat Valley situation

Taliban take war to Pakistani cities

AFP, Geneva/ Islamabad

Senior Red Cross officials said Sunday they were "gravely concerned" over the humanitarian situation in Pakistan's Swat Valley, where the army has been fighting Taliban fighters for a month.

"The people of Swat need greater humanitarian protection and assistance immediately," said Pascal Cuttat, head of the organization's delegation in Pakistan, in a statement released from the ICRC's Geneva headquarters.

Meanwhile, Taliban rebels in Pakistan are taking their war to the cities, honing terror tactics to maximise civilian carnage after suffering heavy losses in a blistering military offensive, analysts say.

Pakistan has been rocked by 14 bomb blasts that have killed more than 80 people in urban areas since it launched a determined air and ground assault against the Taliban in pockets of the northwest at the end of April.

The military said on Saturday that troops had regained control of the main town of Mingora in Swat valley from the Taliban, in what is being touted as a significant milestone in the month-long ongoing offensive.

But the rebels, who Washington fears threaten Pakistan's very existence, are striking back in cities like the regional capital Peshawar, about 200km from Mingora and previously shielded from major attacks.

"They are taking this war to the cities, hoping to build up enough pressure on the government to halt the military activity," security analyst Hasan Askari told AFP.

"The Taliban challenge now threatens routine life and commercial activity in cities... allied extremist groups are facilitating their agenda," he added.

Attackers are becoming increasingly sophisticated, analysts say, executing commando-style assaults armed with suicide vests, vehicle bombs, guns, grenades and rockets.

Over the last two weeks in Peshawar, bombs have exploded outside a cinema, near crowded electronics shops, at a police checkpoint and even alongside a bus full of children with special needs.

And in Lahore, Pakistan's entertainment capital, a bomb, gun and grenade assault killed 24 people and partially damaged the provincial headquarters of the country's premier spy agency on Wednesday.

248 militants killed in Afghan operations

AFP, Kabul

A series of Afghan army operations to clean up insurgent hotspots ahead of August elections has resulted in 248 militants being killed along with 17 soldiers, the defence ministry said Sunday.

The operations were rolled out in five eastern and southern provinces 10 days ago and are continuing, ministry spokesman General Mohammad Zahir Azimi told reporters.

"During these operations, 248 enemy were killed and dozens of others have been wounded," Azimi said.

"In the same period, 17 brave service members have been martyred and 57 have been wounded, and four are missing," he said.

The operations were in the Helmand, Uruzgan, Ghazni, Farah and Paktika provinces, all areas which have a heavy Taliban influence.

"We are trying to use the available capacities of the

national forces and Nato and coalition forces, and the troops that will be deployed in the future, to create an atmosphere where our people could vote freely," Azimi said.

The multinational Nato-led force has secured thousands of extra soldiers for the August 20 polling day.

The force already has nearly 60,000 troops in Afghanistan to help the government fight a Taliban insurgency and build its own capacity.

The elections, the second-ever presidential vote in Afghanistan, are a key test of international efforts to install democracy in a land beset by war, coups and assassinations.

The Taliban have called for a boycott of the polls and the are fears that the insurgents will step up attacks to disrupt polls or keep voters at home.

A candidate for the provincial council elections, which will be held at the same time as the presidential election, was killed last week in a bomb attack.



An activist of the Philippines' Free Burma Coalition joins a candle light vigil at the historic EDSA shrine in Manila yesterday as part of a solidarity action among people of Southeast Asia urging the Myanmar government to release democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

Suu Kyi 'covered up' truth, says Myanmar junta

AFP, Singapore

Myanmar on Sunday accused opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi of deliberately covering up the presence of an American man in her home and warned foreign governments against interfering in the case.

"It is no doubt that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has committed a cover-up of the truth by her failure to report an illegal immigrant to the authorities concerned," Major General Aye Myint, Myanmar's deputy defence minister, told a security forum in Singapore.

"Thus there was no option but to open legal proceedings in accordance with the law," he said.

"She permitted him to stay... She communicated, provided him food and shelter."

The Nobel laureate is on trial at Yangon's notorious Insein Prison and faces up to five years in jail on charges of breaching the terms of her house arrest. She has spent 13 of the past 19 years in detention.

British PM won't quit despite expenses row, dire polls

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown insisted Sunday he would not quit despite a rumbling scandal over MPs' expenses and dire poll ratings for his ruling Labour Party ahead of European and local elections.

He said the expenses furore was "appalling" and "offends everything that I believe in" as well as promising that every lawmaker would be forced to account for all their expenses from the last four years.

A total of 13 lawmakers from Labour and the main opposition Conservatives have said they will stand down since the scandal broke over

three weeks ago. The Daily Telegraph newspaper has been publishing leaked documents detailing hundreds of claims from the public purse for everything from moat cleaning to a duck island.

On Sunday, the Telegraph published an ICM poll suggesting Labour would come third in the European elections, in which Britons vote Thursday, with just 17 percent, behind the second opposition centrist Liberal Democrats.

Even more damagingly, it suggested Labour would also come third in a general election with just 22 percent of the vote -- the worst Labour has done in an opinion poll since 1987.

Liakat tells the same story too

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and Dubai-based ARY group in the smuggling of 10 truckloads of firearms and ammunition seized on April 2, 2004 on the Chittagong Urea Fertiliser Ltd jetty, said CID Chittagong Divisional Special Superintendent of Police (SSP) Mohammad Muslim.

However, like Sahab and ex-NSI chief Brig Gen (retd) Abdur Rahim, Liakat denied his involvement in the transportation of the weapons consignment, said sources in Criminal Investigating Department (CID), which is investigating the sensational Chittagong arms haul case.

During the four-day remand that ended yesterday, Liakat said the embassy provided cellphone monitoring technology to the NSI as a gift, the sources added.

He also talked about the meetings the then NSI chief had with ARY group, officials of the

embassy and a South Asian country's army intelligence agency and named the persons who attended the meetings, sources said.

The ex-NSI DD may be produced before the court with prayer for further remand today, the CID SSP said.

Liakat Hossain was arrested in Dhaka Tuesday following the confessional statement made by ex-NSI director Sahab Uddin. He was placed on a four-day remand Thursday.

Meanwhile, detained ex-NSI chief Maj Gen (retd) Rezaqul Haider is yet to be taken on a six-day remand under Taskforce Interrogation (TFI) cell in Dhaka.

Rezaqul along with the other ex-NSI chief Brig Gen (retd) Abdur Rahim was placed on six-day remand each on May 20.

Rezaqul's lawyers prayed for the cancellation of the remand but the court denied it

Thursday.

Investigation officer of the case Muniruzzaman Chowdhury, a senior ASP of CID Chittagong, told the court that Rezaqul would be taken on remand this week.

Sources said Rezaqul might be quizzed at the TFI cell today or tomorrow.

The two ex-NSI bosses were arrested at their Dhaka homes on May 16 following the confessional statement of Sahab.

The CID yesterday sought a 10-day remand for ex-NSI director Sahab Uddin before the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Court.

The court would hear on the remand prayer later.

Meanwhile, former adviser to a caretaker government Maj Gen (retd) MA Matin said the last caretaker government did not meddle in the investigation of the sensational Chittagong arms haul case.

150 Daud operatives

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national identity card. On their Bangladeshi passports, Merchant adopted the name Abdur Rahman and Zahid took the name Arif Sheikh.

Talking to The Daily Star, DB Deputy Commissioner Monirul Islam said, "So far as we know, Daud Ibrahim and Chhota Shakil have some agents in the country and we are trying to trace and arrest them."

"During interrogation Merchant, Zahid and Kamal admitted that Chhota Shakil may have many other people staying in Bangladesh," he said. "We will also investigate how Merchant and Zahid managed the fake passports and certificates," he added.

According to DB officials, Brahmanbaria Municipality Mayor Hafizur Rahman Mollah issued the nationality certificate and a birth registration certificate to Merchant.

Councillor Mohammad Faruk Miah of the municipality certified that he has known Merchant for the last 10 years.

When contacted over phone, Brahmanbaria Municipality Mayor Hafizur Rahman said, "I signed the certificate after the councillor and a doctor certified him [Merchant]."

While admitting the mistake, he raised the question how could they dodge the police.

Talking to The Daily Star, Merchant said, "It is not impossible that Daud Ibrahim and Chhota Shakil have agents in the country. But I do not know anybody."

Merchant denied all allegations of setting up a network and other plans. "I have come here only to hide and I have been trying to start a business," he said.

"I have managed a passport, fake nationality certificate and other papers as documents so that I can obtain a trade licence for importing motorbike from Mumbai," said Merchant, adding, "I have never met and talked to Daud Ibrahim. But I had regular contact with Chhota Shakil. It is not known to me whether Daud Ibrahim and Chhota Shakil have visited Bangladesh."

Merchant, 39, has mother, a brother, wife, a 14-year-old son and a 12-year-old daughter in Mumbai.

Asked why he killed Gulshan Kumar, he denied killing him and said a person named Anil Sharma killed Gulshan Kumar and that he was implicated in the case with false charges.

DB sources said they identified Zahid and Merchant by tracking their mobile phones and arrested them by trapping them through Zahid's detained girl friend.

2,781 'political' cases

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examined the documents of 11 cases and found that those were filed with "political motive" to "harass" her.

He also sent his opinion for withdrawal of the cases. The district committee later reviewed the opinion and sent those to the home ministry for a final decision, sources say.

Meanwhile, BNP chief Khaleida Zia, her sons Tarique Rahman and Arafat Rahman Koko submitted applications for withdrawal of 20 cases filed against them during the last caretaker government's rule.

The applications were later sent to the MPP for his opinion, but he has yet to scrutinise the documents, PP office sources say.

Zillar also said he sent 2,000 applications to the MPP for his opinion on merit of the cases. The PP had already given opinion for withdrawal of 214 cases.

After receiving opinion from the PP, the district committee reviewed the opinion and sent those to the home ministry for a final decision, Zillar said.

Asked whether he received any opinion about withdrawal of cases against Khaleida, he said he did not get any opinion as only one PP cannot get enough time to review a huge number of cases in a short time.

The PP had earlier appealed for more time instead of 15 days for disposal of the applications. The application for extension of time to review the cases was sent to the government, the Dhaka DC said.

Since the government's move to review "politically motivated" cases, different political leaders started submitting applications to the district magistrates and deputy commissioners across the country.

Of the 11 cases against Hasina, eight were filed during the previous BNP-led alliance rule and the rest during the tenure of the Fakhruddin Ahmed-led caretaker government. Hasina was detained for around a year by the caretaker government in connection with the cases.

Bashundhara Group Chairman Ahmed Akbar Sobhan alias Shah Alam and his family members had earlier submitted applications to the DM for withdrawal of the cases filed against them during the caretaker rule.

A few political bigwigs including Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury, Deputy Leader of the House Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, Home Minister Sahara Khatun, AL lawmakers Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, Engineer Mosharraf Hossain

and Kamal Ahmed Majumder and former AL lawmaker Mokbul Hossain have appealed to withdraw their cases.

Of them, AL lawmaker Haji Mohammad Selim, an accused in 137 cases, had also submitted applications for withdrawing 85 cases.

5 thugs beaten

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Police rushed to the spot and recovered two guns, three cartridges and a bullet from the dead criminals, Aslam said.

He claimed they were members of a gang of robbers.

The bodies were sent to Chittagong Medical College Morgue for autopsy, said the OC.

The injured were rushed to nearby Dohazari Health Complex and were undergoing treatment.

Additional Superintendent of Police (South) Shafiqul Islam visited the spot.

Shafiqul told The Daily Star that crimes, mainly robberies, have increased alarmingly in the area recently.

He said the Satkania Police Station is run by only 25 policemen, quite insufficient to combat crime. "I already requested my superiors to make arrangements for additional policemen at the station to help the community police fight offences," he added.

Meira Kumar may become Lok Sabha Speaker

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

A senior woman lawmaker and a prominent backward caste leader of India's ruling Congress Party has emerged as the surprise choice for the Speaker of Lok Sabha and if elected to the post she would break the glass ceiling.

Meira Kumar, the 64-year-old elected member of Lok Sabha from the eastern state of Bihar, came up as the front runner for the post of the Speaker of the lower house of Parliament.

The decision about Kumar, daughter of late Dalit leader Jagjivan Ram, was taken at a meeting of Congress Core Group at Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's official residence here on Saturday and a formal announcement is expected in a day two.

The election to the post of Speaker is slated for June 3, the first day of the session of the newly-elected Lok Sabha after the recent parliamentary polls, and if elected, Kumar will be the first woman to occupy the high post.

50pc drop in mango output

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Chapainawabganj where mango grows on the highest 22,000 hectares of land while it is about 8500 hectares in Rajshahi.

The prolonged drought due to change in the climate caused mangoes to ripen earlier, said agriculturist Dr Ittefaqul Azad adding, "It eventually spoils affects the taste of mangoes."

"About 30 percent buds are damaged during flowering while over 20 percent mangoes are lost in storm and other natural factors of," said horticulturist SM Quamruzzaman in Natore.

Horticulturist Mohammad Mofazzal Hossain of Kollyanpur Horticulture Center in Chapainawabganj explained that a heavy dense fog instead of hot temperature in early January affected the flowering.

Most of the trees grew new leaves rather than buds and buds in huge quantity were ruined as the chill continued and scanty rainfall since October prolonged the drought affect-

ing the mango yields, he said.

"Mango production was the worst hit by the climate change this year," he added.

Mango growers in Chapainawabganj have their own words for explaining climate change. "We are cursed with Moha this year," said 55-year-old mango grower MA Mazid Fazlu at Kansat.

Horticulturists explained that Moha is a kind of disease appears in the form of mould on leaves. It happens specially when the mist shrouds the nature during summer nights, another change in the weather pattern.

They said that adequate rainfall could save mango trees from this kind of disease.

This correspondent found mango growers worried in Chapainawabganj and Rajshahi as the number of trees bearing fruits is inadequate.

The largest mango markets at Kansat, Bholahat and Sona Mosque roadsides were vacant and a very few traders were found waiting for buyers at Sadarghat in

Chapainawabganj town.

"A week of the Jaistha has already elapsed and we are yet to take mangoes to the markets as weather changed, the harvesting schedule," said Shawkat Ali, a mango trader.

"I can hardly expect 60 maunds now from the orchards where 300 maunds were yielded last year," said Shahidul Islam at Kansat.

However, at Baneshwar market in Rajshahi, Gut mangoes were being sold at Tk 800 to Tk 1000 while Gopalbhog in between Tk 1600 and Tk 1700 per maund.

"I am wondering if I can manage to get half the profit of last year," said Bulbul Islam, a college student and seasonal mango trader at Baneshwar.

They are doing very little about the adverse effects of climate change on this sector that where a huge number of people find their livelihood especially during the summer season.

Rajshahi regional DAE chief admitted the fact and said it is due the priority given to staple crops paddy and wheat.

Action plan

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the ruling party's election manifesto," committee Chairman Khandaker Asaduzzaman told The Daily Star after the meeting at the parliament building.

The committee asked the Prime Minister's Office to form a strategic cell comprised of experts from different professional bodies to oversee and monitor activities of all ministries, Asaduzzaman said.

Meeting sources said the committee members expressed frustration over lack of coordination in civil administration.

One of the committee members told The Daily Star that they discussed the issue of lack of coordination between ministers and secretaries and also between field-level and ministry officials.

"We held discussions on a set of recommendations placed by prime minister's Adviser HT Iqbal for making the administration dynamic and effective," a committee member told The Daily Star wishing anonymity.

The committee chairman and the members by and large agreed on the recommendations which observed that several secretaries are not loyal to the present government and that they often act against it, said the source.

"We also discussed the issue of professional ineptitude of several secretaries," said another committee member requesting anonymity.