

Pakistani army backs up citizens fighting Taliban

Mob kills 13 more militants in revenge attacks

AFP, AP, Peshawar

Pakistani villagers seeking to avenge a deadly mosque blast have killed 13 more suspected Taliban, the army said yesterday as helicopter gunships were deployed to support the mob.

Police official Atlas Khan confirmed yesterday that helicopter gunships struck two villages where the militants have strongholds late Monday and Tuesday morning.

He says the aircraft are monitoring to see if any militants try to escape the villages. Earlier a group of Taliban fighters under siege by hundreds of angry tribesmen tried to sneak to another village in northwest Pakistan, only to find themselves cornered there too, an official said Tuesday.

A citizens' militia that sprang up over the weekend to avenge a deadly suicide bombing at a mosque in Upper Dir district appeared unwilling to stop pursuing the Islamist fighters, underscoring the rising anti-Taliban sentiment in Pakistan.

Hundreds of tribesmen in northwest Upper Dir district took up arms Saturday, a day after 38 people were killed in a mosque suicide bombing in the region, which sits on the fringes of a six-week military offensive against the Taliban.

The militia -- known locally as lashkar -- were on Tuesday surrounding two villages where militants are believed to be holed up, the army said in a statement.

"Lashkars in Upper Dir secured four villages and killed 13 terrorists," it said. The army said Monday that militants had killed 14 suspected Taliban, taking the militant death toll from the uprising to 27.

A military official who did not want to be named as he was not authorised to speak to the media said army helicopter gunships and artillery also pounded suspected militant

hideouts in Upper Dir. "The shelling was in support of the lashkar," he told AFP.

"Lashkar men are positioned on surrounding mountains and keeping a vigil on the movement of Taliban militants," he added.

Pakistan's government has in the past encouraged the formation of lashkar militias to help the official armed forces in their fight against militants, and say they want to build up and arm such community forces in the north-west.

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Trans-Asian

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The event will be presided over by Noeleen Heyzer, under-secretary-general of the United Nations and executive secretary of ESCAP. Barry Cable, director of ESCAP's transport division will feature a presentation on the Trans-Asian Railway followed by a question-answer session with Heyzer and Cable.

The Trans-Asian Railway network, which was initiated in the 60s, comprises 114,000 km of rail routes of international importance. It aims to offer efficient rail transport services for goods and passengers within the ESCAP region and between Asia and Europe.

Of 30 landlocked countries, 12 are located in Asia with nearest ports often several thousands of kilometres away. The network will provide improved access to major ports for the countries.

The link offers immense potential to shorten the distances and reduce transit time between countries and regions being a catalyst for the notion of international transport as a tool for trade expansion, economic growth and cultural exchanges.

The agreement also identifies stations of international importance most of which are located inland and have similar functions to that of seaports. This will be called "dry ports" which as consolidation and distribution centres in the hinterland, creating new opportunities for growth and benefits of economic and social development to a wider population.

This is the second treaty developed under the auspices of ESCAP - the other being the International Agreement on the Asian Highway Network that entered into force July 2005.

TAR Background
The international events that punctuated the 60s, 70s and early 80s influenced the momentum of the TAR concept. However, with the political and economic changes in the region between 80s and early 90s, the development of the concept was revived.

The network was initially divided into four major components, which were studied separately. They are: (i) A northern corridor connecting the rail networks of China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, the Russian Federation and the Korean Peninsula.

(ii) A southern corridor connecting Thailand and the southern Chinese province of Yunnan with Turkey through Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Sri Lanka.

(iii) A sub regional network covering the ASEAN and Indo-China sub regions, and

(iv) A north-south corridor linking Northern Europe to the Persian Gulf through the Russian Federation, Central Asia and the Caucasus region.

Pak blast
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Foreign officials said foreign nationals were also among the wounded.

"52 injured people were brought to hospital, six of them foreigners," Doctor Sahib Gul told AFP at Peshawar's main Lady Reading Hospital. "Seven of the injured are in a serious condition."

Rows of balconies appeared to have been ripped off the face of the hotel, where rescue workers struggled to help those trapped inside. A clutch of United Nations vehicles were among dozens of charred cars parked outside.

"More than 500 kilograms of explosive material was used in the blast," senior police official Shafiq Malik told AFP.

Yesterday's attack echoes a suicide truck bomb attack on the luxury Marriott Hotel in Islamabad in September 2008 that killed 60 people.

Pakistan has been hit by a string of devastating attacks in recent weeks, with markets and security targets hit in Peshawar and police buildings targeted in Islamabad and the cultural capital Lahore.

On Friday, a Lahore bomb ripped through a mosque packed with worshippers, also in the northwest of the country, killing 38 people and wounding dozens more in the deadliest such attack in more than two months.

The Taliban in Pakistan have warned of more "massive attacks" in retaliation for the military operations against them in Swat, Lower Dir and Buner.

Nizami guilty

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The probe team was formed on April 28 in a BMDA board meeting held with Ahad Ali Sarker, state minister for youth and sports, in the chair over allegations of irregularities involving at least Tk 400 crore of BMDA funds.

The probe team revealed involvement of M Asaduzzaman, former BMDA executive director and brother of former militant patron Aminul Haque, in the mismanagement of funds.

According to the probe report, Nizami misusing his power as agriculture minister in April 2002 recommended Ataur Rahman Khan, a Jamaat follower and spare parts supplier, for BMDA work orders ignoring his own ministry's stance on the work.

The report finds the process for procuring 40 kinds of spare parts for repairing old diesel-run irrigation machines was initiated in 1998-99 fiscal year and several bids were called for this.

Finally Ataur Rahman Khan, a contractor from Thanthania, Bogra, offered the lowest bid among three bidders and was given the work order for the supplies in May 2001.

In July 2001, the agriculture ministry froze the work orders following allegations of irregularities. Additional Secretary Khawaza Abdur Rahman investigated the matter, says the probe report.

Next November an 11-member technical committee was formed following the ministry's directive to outline proper actions over Khawaza Abdur Rahman's findings and the committee in its December 2001 report termed the procurement illogical and technically not viable.

The committee also reported that the procurement would be "useless and a waste of money" as BMDA had by then started converting its diesel-run irrigation machines to electricity-run machines. It also mentioned lack of funds for the procurement.

In spite of the ministerial stance on the work orders and technical committee's opinion against the procurement, the probe team revealed that Nizami, in April 2002, recommended Ataur's application, misusing his power as the then agriculture minister, for processing the work orders.

Acting on Nizami's recommendation, Asaduzzaman "unilaterally and without any authority" allowed Ataur the month after the spare parts supply work worth over Tk 7.07 crore.

The probe team said Ataur Rahman Khan was a follower of Jamaat-e-Islami and Nizami recommended him as BMDA supplier violating rules.

Bogra Jamaat Ameer Shahab Uddin confirmed Ataur's involvement in Jamaat. "He [Ataur] as a businessman used to provide us funds when needed."

Ataur is now a director of Pro-Jamaat Diganta Media Corporation and he was former director of Islami Bank Bangladesh Ltd, added Ataur's son Mostafa.

However, with Ataur's supplied parts, the BMDA repaired 48 Yanmar and Duetz irrigation machines spending Tk 3 crore, the report said, adding that only two of those machines have so far been used while the remaining 46 have become useless lying unused for several years.

The team revealed that the BMDA had to manage funds from other sectors for the "high-cost procurement" while the team believes new machines could have been bought at 60 percent of the procurement and repair cost.

The BMDA would also have been able to install 700 submersible water pumps or 100 deep tube wells with the money wasted for spare parts and repairs, the probe team said. It says that facts suggest that the supplier and those who helped him getting the job got benefited.

Using Nizami's recommendation, Ataur gathered many other spare-parts-supply jobs from the BMDA during the four-party alliance government's rule that involved Tk 35 crore. The probe team observed that this money was mostly wasted and misappropriated.

The probe suggested that legal actions against people responsible and managers to recover wasted money should be taken. It recommended changes in the present BMDA administration as it found some of the officials also helped Asaduzzaman in his crimes.

A team member insisting anonymity said, "The nexus between the Jamaat chief and the militant patron's brother sounds quite mysterious which prompted us to submit five days of primary report just after five days of starting investigation...which is yet to be over."

Asaduzzaman is the brother of Aminul Haque, former post and telecommunications minister.

Inspector general of police and law commission member.

"BMDA is a project for agricultural growth in Barind region but its pace was hampered by some corrupt staff," said another member of the probe team.

The team also found that M Asaduzzaman as BMDA's chief executive spent some Tk 71 crore of the revenue sector at his own will and without any proper approval during his five-year term. The BMDA did not maintain any balance sheet or financial income and expenditure leaving scope for major financial mismanagement.

The probe revealed that the government allocated Tk 9.58 crore for Intensive Forestry Project in Barind region. Asaduzzaman arbitrarily used over Tk 2.66 crore of the fund for implementing an unapproved project called plantation on field isles in 17 upazilas under Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj and Naogaon.

The remaining Tk 6.92 crore was stated to have been spent for planting three lakh fruit trees and 20 lakh forest trees in the three districts in 2001-02 and 2002-03 fiscal years. To the team it seemed unrealistic that BMDA planted so many trees within the short time.

Most of the trees were purchased from Centre for Action Research-Barind (CARB), an NGO opened up by none other than Asaduzzaman himself. The BMDA even provided government vehicles to help CARB carry trees to project sites, revealed the report.

Asaduzzaman allegedly wasted Tk 40 lakh for planting "high-yielding" mango trees in 2006-07 year. He overcharged 24,168 mango plants for over Tk 6 lakh from CARB for planting those in Natore, Sirajganj, Pabna, Kurigram and Rangpur.

The probe found another stunning fact that the BMDA employed some 68 dealers for collecting irrigation water bills from farmers between 2001-02 and 2007-08 fiscal years and 28 of those dealers were CARB employees who drew about Tk 29 lakh as five percent commission on the bills.

This is an example how Asaduzzaman used a government institution for the benefit of his NGO, the probe report read.

Asaduzzaman was the executive director of both BMDA and CARB simultaneously and the probe found that around 50 BMDA staffers "forced" to enrol as CARB's life-long member by donating Tk 5,000 each, Tk 2.55 lakh in total, in 1998-99 fiscal year.

At least 72 BMDA staff enrolled as CARB members donating a total of Tk 13,920 at the same time.

UP chairman
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Witnesses said a group of local people chased Monir and encircled him at Lohar Bridge in the area around 1:45pm when he was passing through the locality by his private car.

Monir was then locked in an heated altercation with the locals and at one stage he pulled his firearm and sprayed five to six rounds of bullet on the crowd," said an employee of a local shop who witnessed the incident.

After spraying bullets, Monir fled the scene by his private car. Hasan died on the spot while another youth Sumon sustained bullet injury in his neck. Two others were also injured after being hit by his speeding car.

Sumon, 32, a pedestrian, was admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH). Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Kamrangirchar Police Station Mohammad Nazrul Islam said UP Chairman Monir was locked in a quarrel with locals when they intercepted his car and the chairman fled the spot at one stage firing bullets.

On Monday during a meeting of Ashrafabad High School committee, some Awami League (AL) men blamed him for misappropriating money of the school fund, the OC added.

Seeking anonymity a local rickshaw puller who witnessed the incident told The Daily Star that around seven to eight people chased a car near Lohar Bridge at about 1:45pm. He heard gunshots shortly after the chase.

Organising secretary of Kamrangirchar Thana unit Swachhasebok League Anwar Mia said UP Chairman Monir sprayed bullets on people and left with the scene by his car while he along with 10 others were sitting at a timber shop in the area.

Mrs Roma, wife of Monir, quoting him said armed AL men fired at his car and he fled back to escape the scene.

She alleged that leaders and activists of local AL have been trying to grab over 200 acres of government land behind Ashrafabad High School on the bank of river Buriganga. Her husband has a rivalry with AL men, as he demanded constitutional playground, educational institution and hospital on the land for the welfare of the people of Kamrangirchar, Ruma said.

She added that her husband went into hiding after leaving his car at the residence to avert further attack by AL men.

Kamrangirchar Thana Swachhasebok League president Golam Maula Reza filed a murder case against UP chairman Monir and 15 others with Kamrangirchar police early today.

Peacekeepers

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chase meant for use in UN peacekeeping missions cost around 8.46 percent of the funds.

Apart from the inadequacy of equipment, the report cites the army's limitations in sending troops within a short period of time. "If a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) is formed, it can be sent to UN peacekeeping missions at short notice, as well. And that will elevate the force's image abroad."

It also suggests stepping up diplomatic efforts to ensure increased number of Bangladeshi staff officers in UN headquarters and troops in missions.

Since the country began participating in peacekeeping missions in 1988, it has contributed over 73,176 soldiers in 41 UN missions in 30 countries.

The report said the troops earned Tk 7,445 crore over the last seven fiscal years.

Their performance has been lauded worldwide.

Observers say despite political instability and economic pressures, Bangladesh never shied away from fulfilling its global responsibilities.

Its readiness to contribute large, varied and sizeable troops will only add to its commitment to peacekeeping, they noted.

Offshore

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monthly, said this at the ministerial meeting of the American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham) Dhaka Sheraton Hotel.

He was speaking on "Energy Security for Bangladesh". "We will soon be finalising contracts with the eligible IOCs selected in the bidding. We hope to complete the deals within a month to expedite the improvement of gas and power supply across the country," Toufiq-e-Elahi said.

Earlier, during the tenure of the caretaker government, the state-owned oil and gas exploration corporation Petrobangla selected US oil company ConocoPhillips and Irish Tullow for offshore gas exploration.

ConocoPhillips offered to invest US\$442.63 million under four Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs) for eight blocks while Tullow offered to invest for one block under the bidding round held in February 2008.

Toufiq-e-Elahi also said the government will be distributing around 20 million of energy-saving lights (fluorescent bulbs) free of cost through different government and non-government organisations next year to tackle the energy crisis.

He said the government is also exploring alternate sources of energy alongside conventional ones.

Members of the parliamentary standing committee and local MPs from northern districts will pay visits to Barapukuria coal mine areas to persuade local people for cooperation in coal extraction from the mine, the adviser told the AmCham meeting.

US ambassador James F Moriarty, AmCham President Syed Ershad Ahmed, local entrepreneurs and businessmen attended the lunch.

352 students
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to restrain the agitating guardians from ransacking the school following the incident.

Acting headmaster of the school Abdus Sattar said the students suffered stomachache and started vomiting after taking the high-protein biscuits.

Abdus Salam, resident medical officer of Barguna general hospital told The Daily Star that the children became sick as they ate the biscuits physically-stomach just after physical exercise under the sun. The children were out of danger, he said.

Sample biscuits were sent to Dhaka through Health Department for tests. Distribution of the biscuits is suspended till experts' confirmation.

The Deputy Commissioner of Barguna formed a seven-member probe committee in this regard.

Sheikh Hasanuzzaman, project director of WFP biscuit distribution programme, however, claimed that the biscuits were not date-expired.

A total of 568 students of different primary schools of Khagrachhari also suffered the similar consequence on June 1.

BNP's grassroots

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The party announced committees of 71 out of 75 organisational districts, as top leaders of the party failed to settle the three committees -- Dhaka district and Dhaka city and Manikganj because of internal dispute.

Sunamganj district committee is also yet to be announced due to parliamentary by-election scheduled to be held on June 15.

Those who are known to be either corrupt or convict or controversial but were included as conveners and joint conveners in the committees are Asadul Habib Dulal, Iqbal Hasan Mahmud Tuku, Nadim Mostafa, Mizanur Rahman Minu, Naser Rahman, Ilias Ali, Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, Kharur Jamal Nizam, Wadud Bhuiyan, AKM Mosharraf Hossain, Taimur Alam Khandaker, Moshirur Rahman.

Most of the top reformist leaders like Osman Faruk, Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf, Masud Arun were not included in the district committees because of strong objection from party Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain, said the party insiders.

However, some other known reformists including Fazlur Rahman, Maj Gen (ret'd) Mahmudul Hasan, Kazi Golam Mosharraf, Shamsul Alam Pramanik, Dr Shahrier, Motiar Rahman Talukder, Mosharraf Hossain Mangu were heading the new committees.

Fazlur Rahman joined Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) after 1/11 changeover while Mangu was expelled from the party before the parliamentary election for violating party discipline.

Party Discipline Secretary Rizvi Ahmed last evening handed over the list of convening committees to reporters at a briefing held at the party's central office.

The conveners and joint conveners of district committees have to submit a list of 51-member convening committee by June 25 to central committee. The district convening committees will have to form 31-member convening committees for upazila, thana and municipality units under their district by July 15.

The upazila convening committees will form union level convening committees by July 30 and union committees will form committees for wards by August 15.

The party will start recruiting new members and a membership renewal campaign from August 16 to September 15.

According to the party decision, executive committees of ward level will be formed through council by

September 30 and union committees by October 15.

New executive committees of upazila, thana and municipality will be formed through council by October 30 and as for the district and city units the election will be held by November 15.

After the humiliating defeat of the party in the 2008 parliamentary election, the demands for the party reorganisation stemmed from the grassroots.

On the basis of the opinion of grassroots level leaders party Chairperson Khaleeda Zia declared on Feb 1 that the party would go for the reorganisation.

India for peace if Pakistan cracks down on militants
AFP, ANI, New Delhi/ Islamabad

India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said Tuesday he wanted peace with arch-rival Pakistan and said he would meet Islamabad "more than halfway" if it cracked down on Islamic militants.

The apparent effort to reach out to Pakistan comes after months of tensions following last year's Mumbai attacks, in which 166 people were killed by Pakistani gunmen.

"It is in our vital interest to make peace with Pakistan but it takes two hands to clap," Singh told lawmakers in parliament.

"If the leadership of Pakistan has courage, determination and statesmanship to act against terror, I assure them we will meet them more than halfway."

"We expect the government of Pakistan to take strong, effective and sustained action to prevent terrorism directed against India and use every means... to bring to justice the perpetrators of terror attacks, including the Mumbai attacks," he said.

Earlier Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari has urged India to resume bilateral peace talks 'unconditionally' so that common problems afflicting both countries can be addressed effectively.

Zardari told the Executive Director of the Kashmir Centre in Washington, Dr Ghulam Nabi Fai, that Pakistan wanted Kashmir issue resolve peacefully.

"The 'merchants of war' promoted violence for settling political disputes, but this had to be resisted through recourse to peaceful indigenous political movements. Pakistan wants an honourable, equitable and peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir," The Dawn quoted Zardari, as saying.

Brig Gen Bari

FROM PAGE 1

Washington DC during the caretaker government rule, is being considered an absconder by the military authorities, army sources say.

"In the army we've declared Bari an officer absent without leave (AWL), which is commonly known as absconding," says an army source.

Bari denied any move seeking political asylum in the US when The Daily Star contacted him over phone following such reports in the local media yesterday.

He however confirmed that he is not coming back to the country soon.

The government in February asked Bari to hand over charge as military adviser and return home.

As he did not, he was called back again in April. This time, he handed over charge but did not return home.

He told The Daily Star yesterday evening that he wanted extension of his service in the US. But as the government did not grant it, he applied for leave.

"I'll return on completion of my children's education," said Bari, who also served in the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) since its inception in 2004.

During the BNP-Jamaat-led government he was transferred to the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) as its director from the post of additional director general of Rab.

During the caretaker rule, Bari was one of the leading figures in the DGFI and played a key role in arresting high-profile graft suspects, mostly political bigwigs and businessmen.

Some of the newly elected lawmakers in and outside parliament strongly criticised the role of DGFI as they "witnessed" during their confinement as corruption suspects in caretaker rule.

Brig Gen Bari, who served as the second man of DGFI since BNP-Jamaat-led rule, was posted to the Bangladesh embassy in Washington DC at the end of caretaker rule.

He told The Daily Star, "I wanted extension of my job in the embassy but government

did not give it. I handed over my charges and applied for leave."

He however did not say if his leave has been granted. He also did not clarify whether he is still in the army or not.

He instead suggested that this correspondent contact the army headquarters about his leave and job.

Army sources say Bari was asked to immediately return home where his leave would be settled. But as he did not, the army considers him an absconder (AWL) officer.

The sources add he has been absconder for the last three weeks and if he continues doing so for 60 days the army authorities would declare him a "deserter".

Bari will have to face trial either as an absconder or a deserter whenever he returns to the country. But in case of absconding, the punishment will be comparatively less, the sources say.

The sources add Bari is still in the army but after 60 days of his AWL he will no more be in the service.

"I did not apply for political asylum as it needs huge money and it is also difficult," Bari said in reply to a question.

Bari's brother and top BNP leader in Habiganj Chowdhury Ashraf Bari Noman told The Daily Star yesterday evening he has no knowledge about Bari's seeking political asylum.

Noman said, "I know that he [Bari] applied to the government for extending his posting in the US after receiving recall notice from Dhaka."

"He went to Washington just four months before the recall order. That is why he sought extension of his posting till July so his children could complete their academic session," Noman said.

He said he doesn't know of any further development after Bari's prayer.

The Daily Star contacted the Bangladesh mission in Washington over phone to verify the reports on Bari's seeking asylum. But no official concerned was available.

Telephone operator and private secretary to the ambassador said though the office opens at 9:30am, no official comes before 10:00am.