

Taliban directly threaten Afghan presidential polls

AFP, Kandahar

The Taliban yesterday threatened for the first time to attack Afghan polling stations, escalating their bid to derail key elections this week after striking Nato in the heart of Kabul.

The threat was made in leaflets, pinned up and dropped in villages in the south, and authenticated by a Taliban spokesman who said the militia would accelerate its bloody campaign of violence on the eve of polls.

Afghanistan's 17 million voters will go to the polls Thursday to elect a president for the second time in history, as well as 420 councilors in 34 provinces in a massive operation clouded by insecurity and logistic headaches.

"This is to inform respected residents that you must not participate in the elections so as not to become a victim of our operations, because we will use new tactics," said one leaflet distributed in Kandahar city and seen by AFP.

The letter was written by Mullah Ghulam Haidar, the guerrillas' purported operations commander in Kandahar city. It said voters -- as allies of the Afghan government and foreign forces --

would be considered enemies of Islam.

"All people are being informed that you must not rent out property to voting centres and if anyone did -- even after elections -- they may face problems," said the letter.

Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadzai confirmed the leaflets were authentic and that commanders were ordering the masses to boycott the vote.

"We are using new tactics targeting election centres... We will accelerate our activities on election day and the day before," the spokesman told AFP.

"I cannot comment on the new tactics we will use. Targeting polling stations won't just be in the south, it is for the whole country," he added.

The leaflets marked the first direct threat from the rebels to attack polling sites. Late last month, the Taliban ordered voters to boycott the polls and join the ranks of the militia in waging holy war to "liberate" Afghanistan.

Electoral officials say insecurity means the number of polling stations could be down as much as 12 percent on an original plan for nearly 7,000.

The defence ministry

claimed a security success, saying Afghan and Nato-led troops wrested a district in the south from the insurgents' control and hoisted the Afghan flag over the centre of Naw Zad on Sunday.

The Taliban threat flew in the face of an announcement from President Hamid Karzai's controversial younger brother, Ahmed Wali, that peace deals had been reached with Taliban commanders in the south to ensure safety at the polls.

Agha Jan, a 24-year-old living just outside Kandahar city told AFP he saw the threat letters pinned on all six mosques in his village of Haji Arab, but said nothing would deter him from voting.

Ahmed Jan, a resident of neighbouring Zabul province, said he saw letters in two districts "telling people that polling stations will be targeted and people must avoid going there".

Taliban threats and soaring attacks have raised widespread concern that poor turnout on Thursday could jeopardise the legitimacy of the elections.

A suicide bombing outside Nato headquarters in Kabul on Saturday killed seven civilians and wounded 91 others, underscoring the ability of the Taliban, which claimed the

attack, to operate with impunity.

It "was a warning that the Taliban can attack any time," said analyst Waheed Mujda.

"The tactics they use make them very difficult to stop," he said.

Thousands of extra US troops have poured into the south, stepping up the fight to crush insurgents but a rising number of strikes have stoked fears that the threat of violence will keep many voters away from the polls.

US and British fatalities have reached new records since the 2001 invasion ousted the Taliban regime and installed a Western-backed administration headed by Karzai, who is seeking re-election this week.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown insisted troops were doing a "vital" job in Afghanistan despite controversy as another soldier's death pushed the total British military death toll to 201.

Brown insisted Britain -- after the United States the largest contributor of foreign troops in Afghanistan -- would not give up, even though the milestone revived questions about the purpose and resourcing of the mission.

Buriganga fed oil

FROM PAGE 1

and thousands of people flooded the area trying to get a transport. As the vessels prepared for their afternoon schedules for the return journey, groups of mechanics in soiled overalls openly discarded gallons of jet-black engine oil into the Buriganga.

"We always empty this oil into the river, it does not really matter because the oil is quickly dispersed into the big rivers," said Taleb Mia, an oil trader on an engine boat under the banner "Saudi Oil Trader".

Members of the law enforcement authorities, gossiping at the Sadarghat terminal area, expressed surprise at the complaint regarding oil dumping and said they would take the matter up with higher officials.

"Where else can they dump this oil?" said one of the policemen, adding.

"If they dump it in the sewerage lines it would end up in the river anyway."

Despite widespread consensus among people from all walks of life, and a firm commitment by the government, especially Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, to save the rivers around Dhaka, the picture along the Buriganga, Turag, Balu and Shitalakhya for creating residential or industrial plots.

Meanwhile, completely unabated, the tanneries and thousands of other highly polluting industries keep discharging millions of gallons of toxic wastes into the rivers. Dhaka Wasa (Water Supply and Sewerage Authority) dumps over 90 percent of its untreated wastes, which flow through its network of sewerage lines and canals, into the rivers around the city day and night.

Even worse, the Dhaka City Corporation keeps dumping truckloads of kitchen wastes into the river along

the port's Mohammadpur area, she added.

Zafar Ahmed Khan, director general of the Department of Environment, said this time he is quite optimistic about saving the rivers around the capital which have long been subjected to various assaults including pollution and encroachments.

He says that this time a ground has been created to take appropriate measures to save the rivers around Dhaka.

"Unlike any other issue, an overwhelming national consensus has been reached to save the rivers," Zafar said, adding, "There is a High Court order that binds us, the prime minister has expressed her firm commitment, so we shall grab this opportunity to save our rivers."

Following the writ petitions, the HC had issued separate rules upon the government to explain why the signing of the treaty and the provisions of the treaty should not be declared illegal and unconstitutional.

On December 2, 1997, the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina signed the peace accord with Parbatya Chattagram Sama-Adhikar Andolok (PCSSA) enforced a half-day strike in Langadu upazila in Rangamati yesterday. Besides, the BCP also called for a daylong blockade in three hill districts on August 20 while the PCSSA gave a call for a two-day general strike in the CHT region on August 19 and 20.

They have been protesting the troops pullout from three hill districts that the government initiated on August 9 with an aim to complete the dismantling of 35 camps and withdrawal of one brigade of army from Kaptai by next month.

Until yesterday, the government could complete withdrawal of 14 camps -- eight in Khagrachari and six in Rangamati, report our correspondents in these districts. Nalakata camp under Panchhali in Khagrachari was dismantled yesterday afternoon.

The High Court bench of Justice Sayeed Refaat Ahmed and Justice Moyeenul Islam Chowdhury passed the withdrawal suspension order upon holding a brief hearing on two separate applications.

Advocate Mohammad Tajul Islam, a pro-Jamaat-e-Islami lawyer, and Md Badiuzzaman, a Banglali resident of CHT, on August 10 filed the applications as supplementary petitions with two writ petitions that they had filed earlier challenging the legality of the CHT Peace Accord.

During the hearing of the applications, Additional Attorney General Murad Reza sought time on behalf of the government to the court for making replies to the applications.

The court gave time to the government and ordered to suspend withdrawal of troops from the CHT areas until August 19.

Earlier, Tajul's counsel barrister Moudud Ahmed told the court that the peace treaty questioned the integrity and sovereignty of the state and it is also tantamount to a breach of the constitution.

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Rab official

FROM PAGE 16

know where her son Jahidul Islam Pinju, 52, lives.

She alleged as she did not tell them where Pinju lives, they threatened to kill her son in 'crossfire' if she does not hand him over to them.

She also said later she came to know that Maj Suman and one of his colleagues had sent the Rab team to kill her son in 'crossfire' after picking him up from the house.

Mahmuda told reporters that her son is now being forced to live in hideouts in fear of Rab 'crossfire'.

Maj Sumon however denied the allegation when he was contacted by The Daily Star, and said he did not send any Rab member to Mahmuda's house.

Mahmuda alleged that Maj Suman's brother Maj (retd) Sujan Ahmed had demanded Tk 5 lakh unauthorised toll from his son's friend Kazi Mahinur on August 30, 2007 over the cellphone, and realised Tk 3 lakh from him in two phases.

Mahinur is a resident of the capital's Mohammadpur area, she claimed.

When Maj (retd) Sujan went to realise the toll of the extortion money amounting to Tk 2 lakh, Tejgaon police arrested him with a pistol in his possession on September 9 of the same year, and later a case was also filed against him with Mohammadpur police station in this connection the same day, she added.

She said as her son was present at the scene, Sujan threatened him saying that someday he will take revenge on him for helping Mahinur, and accordingly after seven months of the incident, two false cases were filed against Pinju with Paltan police station by one of the relatives of Maj Sumon.

But investigation officers of the two cases submitted final reports in both cases clearing Pinju of the charges, claimed Maj Sumon.

Maj Sumon however said his brother Maj (retd) Sujan in 2007 gave Tk 2.40 lakh to Mahinur who is a close friend of Pinju, for sending Sujan to Malaysia, but Mahinur swindled him of the money and did not send him to the destination.

Maj Sumon also said Mahinur and Pinju also collected money from many other

persons in the name of sending people abroad, but they sent none.

He added, on the day of Sujan's arrest, Mahinur and Pinju had asked his brother to meet for receiving the money Mahinur had owed him and on his arrival they detained him and handed him over to police planting a firearm on him. A police investigation later cleared Sujan of the charge, Maj Sumon said.

Mysterious

FROM PAGE 16

Nusrat and Ramzan were hit by splintered glasses, they added.

Sazzad Khan, Kalim's elder brother, told the law-enforcers quoting his brother that the explosion happened as soon as Kalim lit a gas lighter for smoking.

Cook Sunil of the residence, who was outside the house but within the boundary at the moment, told The Daily Star, "I heard a bang at around 11:45am."

"When I entered the house, I found Kalim Khan lying on the floor with severe burns and his wife with injuries to her chin", Sunil said.

Another witness Monir Hossain, a passer-by, said, "As soon as the explosion took place, things were seen forced out of the houses."

Witnesses said almost all the glasses of the duplex building were broken and all the furniture became twisted. One of the walls collapsed while the rest along with the roof got cracked.

Soon after the explosion, bomb disposal units of Rab and DB and a team from CID rushed to the spot.

Sanwar Hossain, assistant commissioner of Explosives Incident Countermeasures under DB, told The Daily Star, "Accumulated gas might have caused the blast. We are yet to recover any explosive from the spot."

Officer-In-Charge Kamal Uddin of Gulshan Police Station also echoed Sanwar saying most of the rooms remain closed as nobody lives there for months and, therefore, gas might get accumulated there.

30 rebels killed as troops pound Taliban bases

AFP, Kabul

The Afghan defence ministry said Sunday that more than 30 rebels, including foreigners, were killed in an operation pounding Taliban centres in a bid to secure a northeast troubleshooter for key elections.

"Tens of terrorists were killed as a result of Operation Thunder Five in the province of Khost," the ministry announced in a statement.

"The operation was launched a while ago for election security, with support from national police, border police and international forces," it said.

"More than 30 have been killed," ministry spokesman General Mohammad Zahir Azimi told AFP after the operation in Spera, in southwestern Khost near the border with

Pakistan.

Independent confirmation of the death toll was not possible and the Nato-led military deployed in Afghanistan had no immediate details.

Afghanistan's defence ministry said troops pounded Taliban centres, "overpowering" the enemy who either escaped or were killed.

"Among those killed are 10 foreign nationals," said the ministry.

US, Nato and Afghan troops have launched multiple operations -- particularly against Taliban strongholds in the south -- in a bid to safeguard imminent Afghan elections overshadowed by Taliban threats and mounting violence.

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Govt asked to halt

FROM PAGE 1

hard on the heels of government's July 29 decision to pull out a brigade of troops and 35 temporary security camps from the region by September this year in line with the 1997 CHT Peace Accord.

August 19 coincides with the planned first meeting of the National Committee for Implementation of CHT Peace Accord. Committee Chief and Deputy Leader of the House Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury is scheduled to chair the meeting in Rangamati.

"Since the beginning of the month, we did 45 operations in the province to clean up insurgent strongholds. During the first two weeks of August, security forces killed 51 Taliban," said the governor Hamidullah Qalandarzai.

Thousands of US Marines have poured into Taliban-controlled regions as part of a sweeping new war strategy under US President Barack Obama aimed at quelling the insurgency.

On August 20, 17 million Afghans are due to elect a president for the second time in history, but Taliban threats

border will become endangered, he said.

Badiuzzaman's lawyer barrister Abdur Razzaq said if the troops are withdrawn, the petitions challenging the legality of signing the CHT Peace Accord with the erstwhile Shanti Bahini in 1997 will become ineffective.

Badiuzzaman filed the writ petition in 2000 and Tajul filed the writ petition in 2007 with the HC challenging the legality of CHT peace accord.

Following the writ petitions, the HC had issued separate rules upon the government to explain why the signing of the treaty and the provisions of the treaty should not be declared illegal and unconstitutional.

On December 2, 1997, the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina signed the peace accord with Parbatya Chattagram Sama-Adhikar Andolok (PCSSA) enforced a half-day strike in Langadu upazila in Rangamati yesterday. Besides, the BCP also called for a daylong blockade in three hill districts on August 20 while the PCSSA gave a call for a two-day general strike in the CHT region on August 19 and 20.

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