

21 killed as Somali forces attack rebels

AFP, Mogadishu

A fresh offensive by pro-government forces against extremist Shebab fighters killed at least 21 people, mainly combatants, yesterday in central Somalia, officials and witnesses said.

Pro-government forces launched an attack on the town of Bulobarde, which is located some 200km north of Mogadishu and was previously controlled by the Shebab, an al-Qaeda-inspired organisation.

Several local residents and officials told AFP they had counted at least 21 bodies and said that the fighting was ongoing.

"They attacked us this morning with a large army but they sheepishly retreated and many of their fighters are strewn in the street now," Sheikh Mohamed Ibrahim, a local Shebab commander, told AFP by phone from the town.

"There is still some sporadic fighting in some parts of the town and we have counted at least 21 dead. The terrorists have suffered great losses in the battle today," said Colonel Adan Yusuf Mohamed, a Somali government military leader in the region.

According to residents, the government

troops were assisted in their latest offensive by Ahlu Sunna wal Jamaa, an influential Sufi religious organisation, which recently took up arms against the Shebab.

The latest clashes came amid a vast counter-offensive against Shebab strongholds in the centre and south of the Horn of Africa country.

An alliance of clan militias, government forces and Ahlu Sunna wal Jamaa fighters earlier this week recaptured two strategic towns from the Shebab without any fighting.

According to residents, the Islamist insurgents however on Wednesday wrested back control of the town of Bulohawo, which sits just across the border from the Kenyan town of Mandera.

Ahlu Sunna wal Jamaa and allied groups have recently inflicted serious losses on the Shebab, who had controlled much of central and southern Somalia in recent months.

Bulobarde is the main town on the road linking the capital Mogadishu to Beledweyn, a key city on the border with Ethiopia.

Residents said the fighting was the heaviest the town had seen in a long time and that both sides used heavy machine-guns and anti-aircraft weapons.

Ahmadinejad unveils cabinet with 11 new faces

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has unveiled a cabinet boasting 11 new faces, including three women, and a number of candidates viewed negatively by Islamic hardliners, media said yesterday.

The line-up was submitted to parliament late on Wednesday, two weeks after Ahmadinejad was sworn in on August 5, the ISNA news agency reported.

Lawmakers will begin examining the names from August 23 before holding a confidence vote on August 30.

Analysts believe Ahmadinejad, whose disputed re-election plunged the nation into its worst crisis since the Islamic revolution, faces an uphill battle to win parliament's approval for all the names on the list.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Raging tussle for power in BJP

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The expulsion of BJP's senior leader Jaswant Singh from the party for his controversial book praising Pakistan founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah reflects the raging tussle for power and growing dissents among second generation of leaders in the saffron party, political analysts said here yesterday.

In a double whammy for Jaswant Singh, his book "Jinnah India, Partition, Independence" was banned by the BJP government in Gujarat state on Wednesday night for allegedly defaming India's first Home Minister Vallabhbhai Patel.

The ban came hours after Jaswant was expelled from BJP as per a decision taken at a special meeting of the party's powerful parliamentary board in Shimla on Wednesday.

According to BJP sources, the trigger for Jaswant's expulsion was his criticism of Patel, who hailed from Gujarat, more

than his praise for Jinnah.

Clearly, Jaswant's views on Patel and Jinnah were totally out of synchronisation with those of BJP and its spiritual fountain-head Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. For BJP and RSS, his remarks were nothing short of "ideological blasphemy."

Patel, who was the Home Minister in the cabinet headed by independent India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, is revered by BJP as the "iron man" who had played a key role in uniting princely states with India soon after independence.

Jaswant's book had charged Nehru and Patel with being responsible for the Partition of India. The criticism of Patel had no doubt touched the raw nerve of BJP leadership, party sources and analysts said.

Questions are doing the rounds why Jaswant was expelled when another senior BJP leader LK Advani, during a tour of Pakistan in 2005, had reportedly praised the "secular"

credentials of Jinnah.

Many BJP leaders, including party spokesman Ravi Shankar Prasad, countered by saying Advani had never questioned Jinnah's role in the Partition and criticised Patel.

BJP insiders say the expulsion of Jaswant had in some ways capped a series of complaints in the party against him since BJP's defeat in parliamentary elections in April this year. The poll defeat sparked public bickering in BJP over fixing accountability with some leaders going public against criticism of their colleagues in a veiled manner.

A report prepared by another senior BJP leader Yashwant Sinha on the party's debacle in Rajasthan state, to which Jaswant belongs, accusing the latter's camp followers of sabotaging the prospects in the state assembly as also parliamentary elections. In Rajasthan, Jaswant's in-house rival was former chief minister Vasundhara Raje.

Nepal, India review bilateral ties

ANI, New Delhi

Visiting Nepal Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal met Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh at Hyderabad House last evening.

Both leaders discussed and reviewed progress in bilateral relations between the two countries.

According to official sources, the intensification of economic partnership between the two countries remained the focus of the discussions. Investment in the hydro power sector was also considered.

The issue of using Nepal's territory for anti-India activities is also believed to have come up during the talks.

The meeting, lasted for about an hour, and was attended by External Affairs Minister SM Krishna, Home Minister P Chidambaram, Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee and National Security Advisor MK Narayanan.

JS body sees govt agencies' instigation

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students in connection with the unrest.

It termed the judicial probe report about the incident that had been submitted to the caretaker government as 'one-sided and incomplete', saying that the one-member probe committee's report dealt with peripheral matters, instead of finding out the causes and the persons responsible for the violence. Retired Justice of the Supreme Court Habibur Rahman was the investigator.

"We want to let the nation know the facts about the August 2007 violence on Dhaka University campus, and also want to identify the persons responsible for the despicable incident," Rashed Khan Menon, chief of the parliamentary committee told reporters after its meeting at Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.

"Different government agencies were involved in instigating and fuelling the violence, and the campus was

turned into a centre of repression," Menon, also the president of Workers Party, said.

On August 2 this year, the House committee decided to investigate the incident.

It also asked the home ministry for a dossier of intelligence reports on the unrest that broke out on August 20, 2007.

Briefing reporters at Jatiya Sangsad Media Centre, Menon told reporters that the committee already started investigating the incident after getting legal advice from the law ministry.

The committee also asked the information ministry to collect all news clippings, photographs, video footage, and news scripts of BBC about the incident, and to submit those to it.

Criticising the judicial probe report, Menon said, "The one-member probe body didn't go deep into the incident. It rather dealt with peripheral issues. Therefore

the report is one-sided and incomplete."

On withdrawing the pending cases, Menon said the committee asked the home ministry to withdraw the remaining cases in connection with the August campus violence through a government executive order.

"We don't want those cases to be withdrawn like those that were scrapped under political consideration," he added.

"We've also asked the home ministry to withdraw the other cases in connection with the subsequent flare-ups in educational institutions in other parts of the country," he said.

Thousands of DU students took to the streets to protest beating of three fellow students and insult of a teacher by some army men on August 20, 2007 at the university gymnasium field during a football match.

They staged fierce demon-

strations demanding withdrawal of an army camp that was stationed on the campus back then, and also an apology from the troops.

Subsequent pitched battles between the demonstrating students and police for the next two days left over 250 people injured, most of whom were also students.

On August 21, the government ordered withdrawal of the army camp from the campus and a judicial probe into the violence.

But the violence already spread to other educational institutions in the capital and elsewhere, prompting the erstwhile government to impose curfews on divisional headquarters on August 22, shutting down universities and colleges.

Security personnel on August 24 picked up five teachers -- two from DU and three from Rajshahi University -- and took them to unspecified places for interrogation.

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A number of joint conveners and members of Barisal district committee boycotted a party meeting on Monday convened by city convener Mahmud Golam Salek. Joint conveners Ahsan Habib Kamal and Bilkis Jahan Shirin in a statement said Salek has no jurisdiction to convene such a meeting.

Leaders of Faridpur BNP on Thursday formed a human chain demanding removal of Shahjada Mian, newly appointed convener of the district unit.

Joypurhat district convener Mozaher Ali Prodhan and joint convener Golam Mostafa formed separate committees in six upazilas and four municipality units.

Party office secretary Rizvi Ahmed had to intervene to solve the crisis," said a central leader.

A faction of Pabna BNP rejected upazila unit committees saying that dedicated leaders were not included in those committees, said party sources.

When asked about the internal conflict among grassroots leader, Lt Gen (ret'd) Mahbubur Rahman told The Daily Star, "It's true that complaints are coming from different districts but these are being resolved through discussion."

He said it would not hamper the party's reorganisation process as the necessary measures are being taken to resolve those crises.

BNP reforms marred Crackdown soon

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the first to get the blame, he said, adding that general people's faith in police force is eroding.

"Why should the police bear this blame? Policemen are friends of the people who pay tax that covers their [police's] salary. Police can never be friendly to the criminals," the IGP asserted.

He said it was important that local level political party leaders come forward in curbing the outlaw menace.

Nur Mohammad said the law enforcement agencies in the region would be provided with special logistics and other supports so that they can work properly.

In his speech, the Rab chief admitted the recent deterioration in law and order in the

region and warned those who are blamed as 'godfathers' of criminals.

"None will be spared this time," Khandkar added.

He recalled the Rab's success in controlling outlaw activities in the region and urged his force to go further on the same action.

Among others, Vice-Chancellor of Islamic University Prof Dr M Alauddin, Mayor of Kushtia Municipality Anwar Ali, Deputy Inspector General of police (DIG) Khulna Range Sheikh Hemayat Hossain, Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Kushtia Abdul Mannan, Commanding Officer of Rab-12 Lt Col Zillur Rahman, and Superintendent of police (SP) Kushtia Sahabuddin Khan addressed the meeting.

HC gives govt the go-ahead

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After the redeployment of army personnel of 35 camps, more than 300 camps and six permanent cantonments will remain in the CHT region and the security of CHT will not be compromised, the verdict read.

In 2000 and 2007, Badiuzzaman, the Bangalee settler in CHT, and Tajul Islam, the pro-Jamaat-e-Islami lawyer, with two petitions challenged the legality of the CHT Peace Accord, signed in 1997, and its provisions.

On August 10, they filed the supplementary petitions along with their long pending writ petitions stating that their writ petitions would become

ineffective after the withdrawal of the troops from the CHT.

The court yesterday said the pending writ petitions, of which the two supplementary petitions are part of, would not become ineffective by the pull out of army personnel of the 35 camps.

The HC bench of Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed and Justice Moyeenul Islam Chowdhury, however, asked the government to submit to this court by October 20 the replies to the rules it had issued in 2000 and 2007 asking the government to explain as to why the CHT peace deal and its provisions should not be

declared illegal and unconstitutional.

The bench also fixed October 22 for hearing on the rules.

During the hearing of the supplementary petitions, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam told the court more than 200 camps of the armed forces have been withdrawn from the CHT so far after the signing of the CHT peace treaty and the law and order situation of that region has improved.

Counsel for the CHT Regional Council Dr Kamal Hossain told the court that redeployment of troops in CHT has been going on for a long time. "We have to look at

the bigger picture," he said.

Tajul's lawyer barrister Moudud Ahmed argued that any executive order like that of withdrawal of army from CHT could be challenged in this court.

After the delivery of the orders, Tajul told The Daily Star that they are considering filing an appeal with the Supreme Court against the HC orders.

Badiuzzaman's counsel barrister Abdur Razzaq said they moved the petition before the High Court to safeguard the independence, sovereignty and solidarity of the country. "We have nothing to comment about the ruling," he said.

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News in Brief

Karadzic case ready for trial: Judge

AFP, The Hague

More than a year after his arrest for war crimes, the case against Bosnian Serb wartime leader Radovan Karadzic is ready for trial, pre-trial judge Iain Bonomy said on Thursday.

"It is my opinion that this case is now ready for trial, and that is the report I will submit to the president" of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), said the judge.

Indian stoning festival banned

AFP, Bhopal

A centuries-old festival in which residents from rival Indian villages throw stones at each other -- often leaving people dead or injured -- has been banned, an official said Thursday.

The annual Gotmar festival in an impoverished central region of the country involved teams competing to capture a tree placed in a river running between two villages as crowds pelted rocks and pebbles across the divide. The origin of the custom is unclear, but many locals in Madhya Pradesh state believe it developed from the tale of two young lovers who lived on either side of the river and wanted to elope together.

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