

Suicide attack on Afghan mosque kills 23

AFP, AP, Jalalabad

A suicide attack killed 23 people, including 18 civilians and four government officials, outside a mosque in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, the provincial governor said.

Among the four officials killed was the deputy head of Afghanistan's intelligence service, Lutfullah Mashal told a news conference in Mihtarlam, capital of the relatively peaceful Laghman province.

The head of the provincial council, the provincial chief executive and the former head of religious affairs in the provincial government were also killed.

"Eighteen civilians were killed. Three were women," Mashal said.

The bomber wounded dozens of

people, detonating his explosives in a crowd of people outside the main mosque in Mihtarlam, the provincial capital of eastern Laghman province, where senior government officials were gathered.

It was the second high-profile bombing in Afghanistan since landmark presidential and provincial council elections were held on August 20 under a cloud of Taliban intimidation and attacks.

The insurgent militia claimed responsibility for the attack. A spokesman said that Afghanistan's deputy intelligence chief Abdullah was the target and that he had been killed.

"There was a suicide attack outside Mihtarlam mosque. There are a big number of civilian deaths. A number of government officials have also been killed,"

interior ministry spokesman Zemarai Bashary said.

He declined to give further details on the identities of the casualties, but confirmed that Laghman's provincial governor and police chief were unhurt.

An official at the Afghan health ministry said at least 23 bodies had been brought into hospitals with 36 people wounded.

"But as the dead and wounded were taken to the mosque, other clinics and shops, the number of dead and wounded will increase," spokesman Doctor Ahmad Farid Raad told AFP in the Afghan capital Kabul.

Sayed Ahmad Safi, spokesman for the Laghman provincial government, said around 20 people were killed and even more wounded.

Is Hakimullah Mehsud dead?

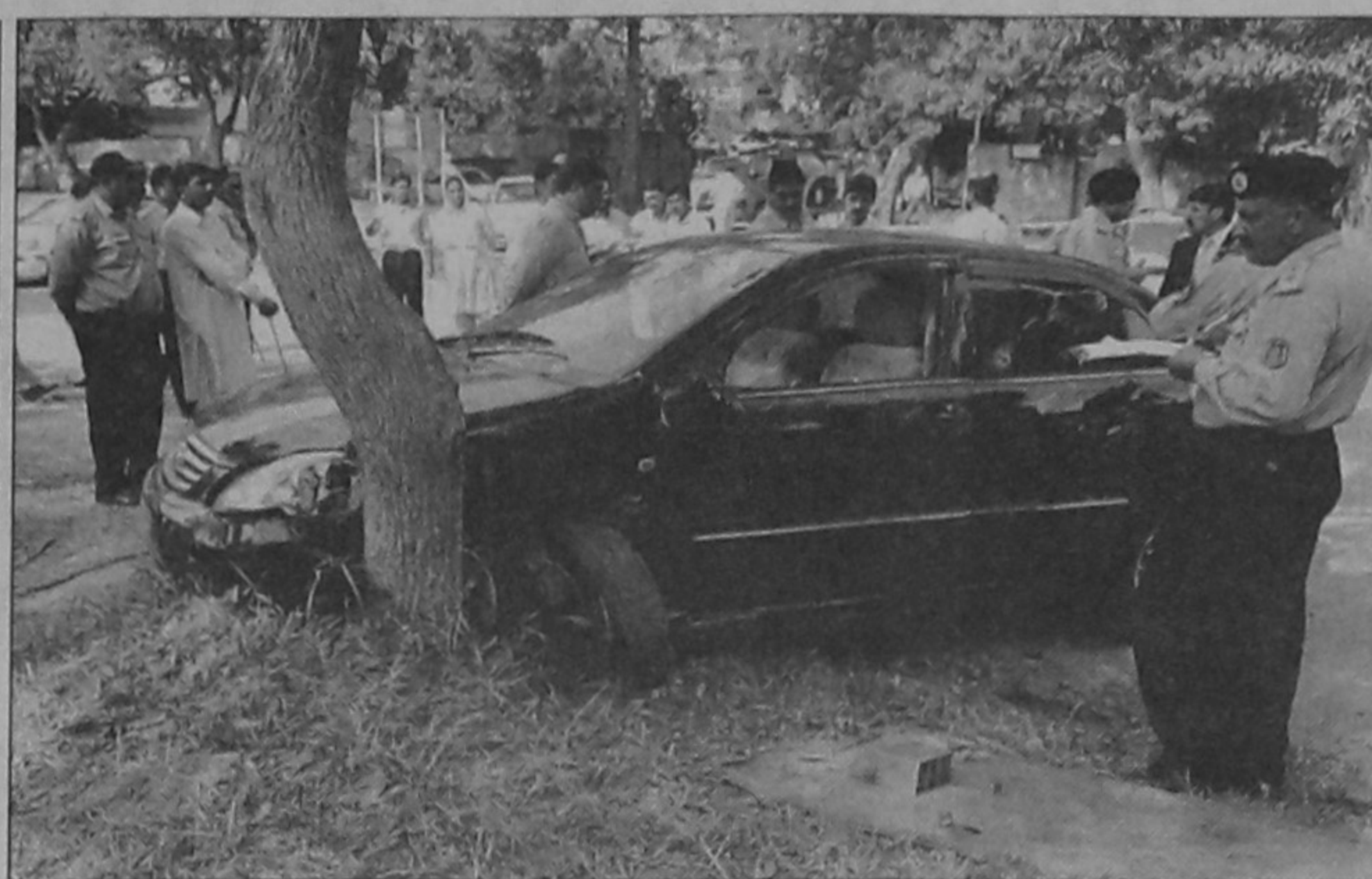
INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

Pakistani security forces believe that new Taliban commander Hakimullah Mehsud is dead, a media report said Wednesday.

A Pakistani TV news channel quoted intelligence sources as saying that the man died some time back and it was Hakimullah's look-alike brother who spoke to news channels recently.

The brother was summoned from Afghanistan to temporarily head the banned Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Online news agency reported.

The channel said that security forces were preparing to launch a big offensive against the Taliban in South Waziristan, close to the border with Afghanistan.



Pakistani police cordon off the area around the bullet-ridden car of Religious Affairs Minister Hamid Saeed Kazmi after a drive-by shooting in Islamabad yesterday. Kazmi was wounded and his driver killed in the shooting in the capital on Wednesday.

News in Brief

Bomb hits Athens stock exchange

AFP, Athens

A powerful van bomb caused major damage Wednesday to the Athens stock exchange and injured a woman in one of two attacks suspected to have been carried out by far-left militants.

The dawn bomb destroyed six cars, tore through windows on the side of the stock exchange building and caused widespread damage inside but the Athens bourse opened for business after a hurried cleanup operation.

23 die in Indian bus plunge

AFP, New Delhi

At least 23 people have been killed after a bus fell into a deep gorge on a mountainous highway in northern India, officials said Wednesday.

The bus was carrying 40 people when it rolled into the gorge while negotiating a bend in the road in the district of Mandi in Himachal Pradesh state on Tuesday.

Obama approval rating dips

ANI, Washington

US President Barack Obama's overall approval rating has only dipped a couple percentage points in August.

In the latest CBS News poll released Tuesday night, the president's overall approval rating is 56 percent, which is down two points from the last poll taken at the end of July.

Saudi Arabia not in favour of Musharraf's trial

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, ANI, Jeddah

Saudi Arabia Tuesday said it is not in favour of a trial against former Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf which could further deteriorate the volatile political situation in that country, the Online news agency reported.

Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Tuesday urged the Pakistani leadership to abide by the agreement reached at the time of Musharraf's resignation that no action would be taken against the former president.

Abdullah, who played a key role in that agreement, Tuesday conveyed the message to visiting Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman Malik during his nearly one-hour meeting with him.

He said any violation of the deal would badly affect the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations.

There is already a political confrontation between various political parties in Pakistan and any step against Musharraf could further deteriorate the situation, the Saudi king noted.

Meanwhile the 'royal' treatment being given to former Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf during his Saudi Arabia visit has his opponents worried.

The special treatment has sparked speculations that Riyadh is trying to use its influence to ask the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) to shun its demand for Musharraf's trial under the Article Six of the Constitution.

Sources said King Abdullah sent his special airplane to London to fetch Musharraf.

Reports regarding Saudi Arabia cracking its whip on the PML-N and other anti-Musharraf parties has probably forced PML-N to come out with clarifications.

A PML-N spokesman denied reports regarding Saudi putting pressure on PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif.

"There has been no official message from the Saudi family to Mian Nawaz Sharif in this regard," The Dawn quoted a PML-N spokesperson, as saying.

Japan's incoming govt faces weak mandate

AP, Tokyo

Japan's new government will have a shaky mandate when it takes office later this month, a poll indicated yesterday, as party leaders acknowledged they must get to work immediately to deal with the country's severe economic problems.

Most Japanese voters chose the opposition in historic weekend elections because they were fed up with a half century of rule by the governing conservatives, not because they were enthused by what the opposition had to offer, according to the poll in the Asahi, a major national newspaper.

The poll found most voters remain sceptical about whether the victorious Democratic Party of Japan can make good on its promises to bring the world's second-largest economy out of its worst slowdown since World War II, rein in the powerful bureaucracy and restore Japan's international credibility after a succession of three prime ministers in three years.

Planters trapped

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followed by an assistant conservator of forest (ACF) and a DFO.

"The size of trees [eligible for permit] varies due to huge time gaps between these officials making their visits. Hence, issuance of permit becomes a cumbersome process," Avoy Prakash explains.

He demands bringing in necessary amendments to the existing CHT Forest Transit Rule, 1973 so that the permit issue could be resolved in a hassle-free manner.

Planters allege a DFO takes Tk 10 per CFT and one-time "speed money" of Tk 15,000, while his official staffs take Tk 5 per CFT for office expenditures, ACF realises Tk 5 per CFT more for verification of jote plus extra Tk 15,000 for speed boat fare and the range officer takes Tk 20-30 per CFT from a permit applicant.

Besides, Tk 3 per CFT is taken by the range office for stopping checking at "Saw Mill", Tk 3,000 for loading timber on trucks and issuing of TP (transit pass) and Tk 500 for staffs, the planters add.

Asked, DFO of CHT South Forest Division Amir Hossain Chowdhury denied the bribery allegations. He said, "We don't take any money from anyone. As we don't get sufficient fuel from the government, they just sometimes arrange speedboats and bear the expenses for fuel."

Sources say during the caretaker government rule several meetings were held at different level regarding amendment to the existing CHT Forest Transit Rule, 1973 to minimise sufferings of the hill people.

Now the file is gathering dust at the CHT Regional Council for its recommendations.

Contacted, Chakma Circle Chief Raja barrister Devasish Roy acknowledged the immediate need for changes in the concerned laws.

"Now the DFOs are the only authorised persons to issue permit. I think this power should be delegated to lower-level officers as the DFOs cannot provide time due to their higher positions for resolving the lengthy process of permit issuance," Raja Devasish observed.

"In the past, the USF [unclassified forest division] was used to issue 'Royalty Permit' to the indigenous people considering our customs. But I don't know why that process is stalled now," he added.

Contacted, Sana Ullah Patwary, DFO of USF, said he could not explain what prompted the government in 1992-93 to stop the 'Royalty Permit' method.

Arctic warming may affect 25pc of world population thru' flooding: WWF report

AFP, Geneva

Global warming in the Arctic could affect a quarter of the world's population through flooding and amplify the wider impact of climate change, a report by environmental group WWF said yesterday.

Air temperatures in the region have risen by almost twice the global average over the past few decades, according to extracts released by WWF.

"What this report says is that a warming Arctic is much more than a local problem, it's a global problem," said Martin Sommerkorn, senior climate change advisor on the WWF's Arctic Programme.

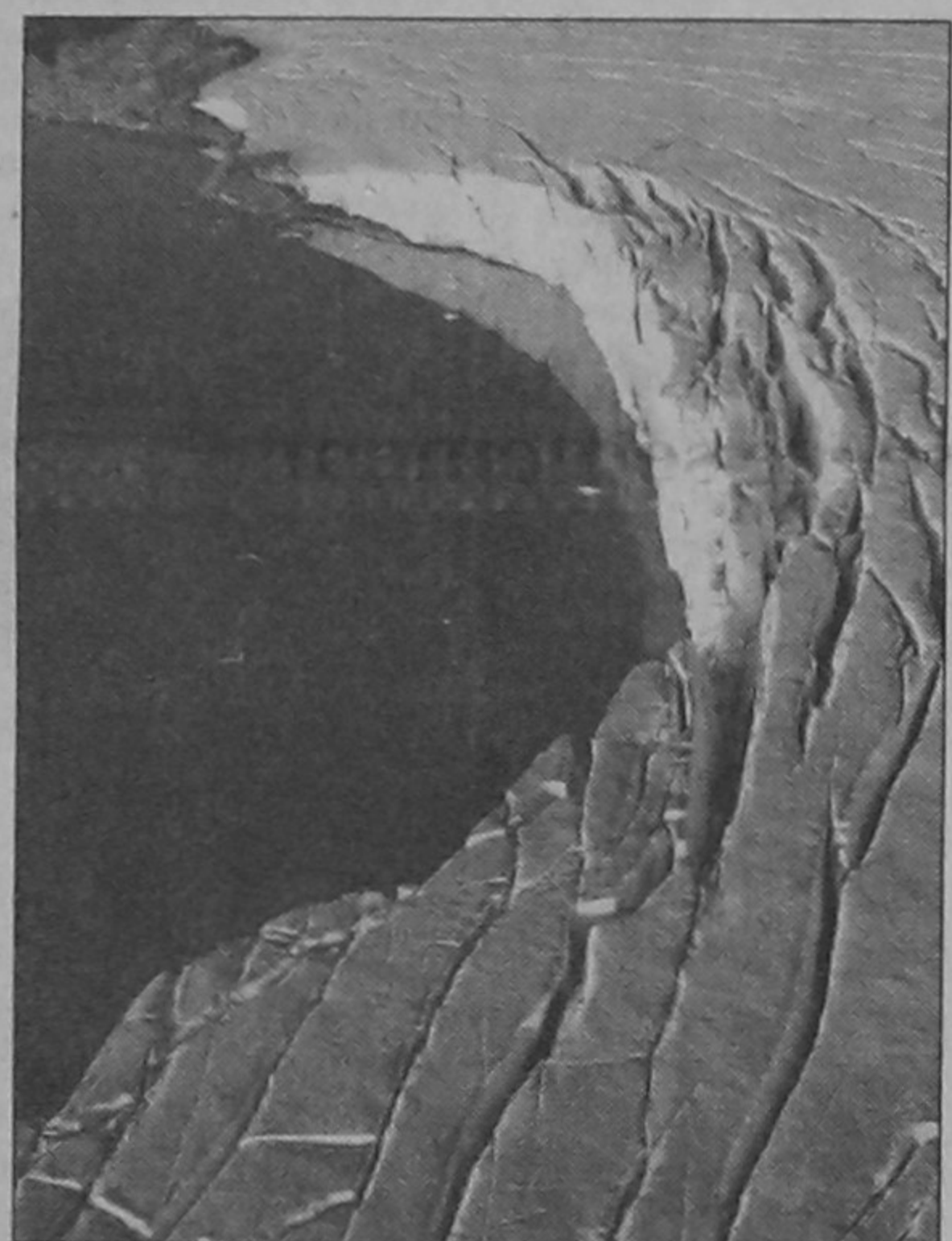
"Simply put, if we do not keep the Arctic cold enough, people across the world will suffer the effects," he warned in a statement.

The combination of thawing Arctic sea ice and melting ice sheets in Greenland and West Antarctica was likely to raise global sea levels by about 1.2 metres (four feet) by 2100, more than previously thought, according to scientists commissioned by the WWF for the report.

"The associated flooding of coastal regions will affect more than a quarter of the world's population," the WWF said.

The report concluded that melting sea ice and the release of pockets of greenhouse gases -- carbon dioxide from thawing permafrost and methane seeping from the depths of the warming Arctic Ocean -- would also fuel disruption to atmospheric and ocean currents much further afield.

The most immediately felt change would be on temperature and rainfall in Europe and North America.



This photo taken on August 21 shows an aerial view of a small melt-lake on the side of Helheim glacier in south-east Greenland. According to Greenpeace, Greenland's ice sheet has more than doubled its contribution to sea-level rise in the last seven years due to a rapid and unpredicted loss of ice.

Tarique's case to be dropped

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Talking to The Daily Star, MPP Mohammad Abdullah Abu said he had earlier scrutinised documents of the 20 cases submitted by the lawyers concerned, and found that one of the extortion cases was filed with political motive and to cause harassment.

"I have recommended withdrawal of the case and sent it to the Dhaka district magistrate for final recommendation," he said.

The MPP said Tarique's name was not in the first information report (FIR). He was shown arrested in the case after his friend Mamun mentioned his name in confessional statement. But there was no cogent document in this regard in the FIR of the complainant. So, the case should be withdrawn, he said.

Sources said the MPP also scrutinised the documents of four cases filed against Khaleda, and one against Tarique's wife Zohaida Rahman. But he did not make any recommendation for withdrawal of the cases.

Earlier on April 30, Khaleda and her family members had appealed to the government for withdrawal of all the 20 cases against them.

Tarique faces 11 cases--seven on extortion charges, three on graft and one on tax evasion. Khaleda's younger son Arafat Rahman Koko is accused in five cases--three on graft and one each on money laundering and extortion charges.

Meantime, the government recommended withdrawal of 13 cases filed against Prime Minister and Awami League

(AL) Chief Sheikh Hasina. Paltan Killings case against Hasina and 45 others has already been withdrawn.

The home ministry had earlier decided to withdraw a case against former law minister and BNP leader Moudud Ahmed for possessing contraband liquors at his residence in April 2007.

Besides, the MPP had earlier recommended withdrawal of 550 cases considering those politically motivated, and intended to cause harassment. The home ministry finally decided to withdraw as many as 455 cases.

Since the government moved to review 'politically-motivated' cases, as many as 2,781 applications have been submitted to Dhaka District Magistrate Zillar Rahman.

Obama praises Islam at iftar party

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama on Tuesday praised Islam as an integral part of America, as he feted prominent US Muslims at an iftar party marking the holy fasting month of Ramadan.

"For well over a billion Muslims, Ramadan is a time of intense devotion and reflection," Obama said, in remarks welcoming his guests in the State Dining Room of the White House.

"Tonight's iftar is a ritual

that is being carried out this Ramadan at kitchen tables and mosques in all 50 states," Obama said.

"Islam as we know is part of America. Like the broader American citizenry, the American Muslim community is one of extraordinary dynamism and diversity."

"On this occasion, we celebrate the holy month of Ramadan and we also celebrate how much Muslims have enriched America and its culture in ways both large and small," the president said.

Most hospitals

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remained ineffective. The health ministry held several meetings with the information ministry regarding the campaign, but it is yet to get a boost.

No banner with awareness messages was found at the DMCH outdoor department while counselling service was completely absent.

Except Dhaka Shishu Hospital, none of the hospitals the government declared to be providing treatment to patients with swine flu or flu-like illness put up such banners.

The health minister yesterday told The Daily Star that the government has completed a process to start massive awareness campaign, which will be aired within a day or two.

Meanwhile, health professionals at DMCH complained that they are yet to get enough antiviral drugs for treating patients and N95 masks for their own protection.

Hospitals like BSMU, NIDCH and BIRDEM are yet to

set up separate corners at their outdoor departments, which poses the risk of rapid spread of the infection in the hospitals themselves.

A dengue patient at BSMU complained that patients with flu-like illness were seen without any mask buying tickets along with others.

Many relatives said from newspapers they came to learn that certain hospitals are providing treatment for swine flu but employees of those medical centres denied it.

They also expressed dissatisfaction with the government's management system of the deadly disease, which has already taken a pandemic turn claiming lives of more than a thousand people across the globe.

The government should be more advanced in tackling the infection as the virus entered the country more than two months ago," said an aggrieved relative of a patient who had a bitter experience at several hospitals while seeking treatment.

Suffered to hear 'no'

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doctor's opinion, as the boy was too young for antibiotics.

The lady said, "We felt more confused about the anti-viral drug [Oseltamivir] and the place where it was available. No one at the government assigned hospitals answered my queries."

Around 9:30am, the lady took her son to Mohakhali IEDCR where the duty people showed her a banner with names of hospitals and asked her to seek assistance over there. She rushed to Suhrawardi Hospital from where she was redirected to BSMU, said the disappointed mother.

"The officials of BSMU, without even considering my son's condition, asked me to take him to NIDCH. I was back again from where I started. I

rushed to NIDCH where I found hundreds of patients waiting. There was no doctor to speak with the patients. However, three third-class employees asked us to wait in the queue.

"Just imagine what my son had to go through. He travelled across the city of traffic congestion with breathing difficulty and came home without any treatment or solution," frustration revealed itself as the mother uttered the words.

The parents of the child have now decided to take him to private chamber of those doctors who work in the particular hospitals assigned for swine flu treatment.

"It will be expensive but at least this time they will not refuse to see my son," said she.

The swine flu pandemic in the

country has made parents of such kids more panicked than ever.

Another mother, who was waiting at the NIDCH with her three-year-old daughter, said, "Although the government has stopped lab testing and suggested starting swine flu treatment right away with intake of Paracetamol and anti-viral drugs, they did not give any guidelines for the child patients."

"There is no major side effect of the anti-viral drug Oseltamivir," said Health and Family Planning Minister AFM Ruhul Haque.

Toriqui Islam, head of medicine department of Dhaka Medical College Hospital, however, suggested parents to consult doctors before giving anti-viral drugs to children.