

Palestinian-Israeli prisoner swap in early stages

AFP, Cairo

Hamas supreme Khaled Meshaal confirmed yesterday that Germany is mediating an Israeli-Palestinian prisoner swap that would include Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit but stressed the bid is in its early stages.

"Concerning Shalit, as you know there is some development as a result of the Germany mediation bid in coordination with Egypt," Meshaal told a joint news conference in Cairo with Arab League chief Amr Musa.

"But we are in the early stages. We have not discussed any (Palestinian) names nor any details," said the exiled leader of the Islamist Hamas movement, which controls the Gaza Strip, during a visit to Egypt.

"More time is needed" before any real progress can be announced, Meshaal said. "We must be cautious and not hasty."

The German weekly Der Spiegel reported in last Monday's edition that Israel had accepted a German-mediated prisoner swap deal to free hundreds of Palestinians in return for Shalit.

"The German secret services have recently been holding talks with the Israeli government and Hamas. The aim is to obtain the exchange of Gilad Shalit against several hundred Palestinian prisoners," Der Spiegel said.

The same day Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum confirmed the report but said there had been "no progress" on the ground.

Meshaal discussed the swap on Saturday with Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, who has unsuccessfully brokered indirect talks between Israel and Hamas on the issue, and is Cairo's point man on efforts to reconcile rival Palestinian factions.

"The topic of the prisoners was one of the main subjects raised during the session," an Egyptian official was quoted as saying by the state-run news agency MENA.

"Finding a solution to this topic will have a major impact on the other questions, such as lifting the blockade and the permanent opening of the crossing points" with the Gaza Strip, he said.

Shalit, who also holds French citizenship, was seized in June 2006 in a deadly cross-border raid from the Gaza Strip conducted by three Palestinian armed groups, including Hamas, which now rules the coastal territory.

His parents received a letter from French President Nicolas Sarkozy on August 28 - the day Shalit turned 23 - pledging that France "will continue to act tirelessly... in order that he be released."

Meshaal, in Cairo since Friday at the head of a large delegation, also discussed with Suleiman efforts to end a protracted rift between Hamas and the secular Fatah party of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

The talks focused on "how to end... Palestinian divisions as quickly as possible, ahead of the political process likely to be launched following the announcement by the United States in a few weeks' time of their vision for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," the Egyptian official said.

The Palestinian reconciliation project remains stalled on three areas of disagreement, the official told MENA, without naming them.

Hamas and Fatah have been in dispute since a split culminated in the Islamists violently seizing control of Gaza in June 2007 after 18 months of shaky coalition government.

Cairo wants the dialogue to resume after Eid-ul-Fitr, the festival marking the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, which this year will be on September 21 or 22.

Abbas said on Saturday after meeting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak that Cairo is reviewing the positions of each Palestinian faction before making proposals "within the next week" and setting a date for a final round of talks.

Egypt has twice postponed the date scheduled for signing a Palestinian unity agreement because of continued disagreements between the rivals.

Yunus

FROM PAGE 1 Responding to a question regarding news in a local daily that Prof Yunus will work for BNP, he said that it is totally baseless, a travesty of truth.

"I am surprised after seeing the news that I will work for BNP. I strongly protest such news and condemn such journalism that went against the truth," he said.

On August 30, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia congratulated Prof Yunus on his receiving Presidential Medal of Freedom Award, the highest civilian honour of the USA.

A five-member delegation led by BNP Joint Secretary General Nazrul Islam Khan handed over Khaleda's letter of felicitation to Yunus at his Grameen Bank office.

Yunus thanked Khaleda for her gesture and said, "We have dreams and the ability to materialise those dreams as well, but we want the opportunity to express the ability."

US President Barack Obama conferred the award on Prof Yunus at the White House on August 12.

Obama's adviser for green jobs resigns

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama's special adviser for green jobs has resigned under pressure from leading Republican politicians and revelations about his controversial past statements, The Washington Post reported Sunday.

Van Jones, a former civil rights activist from California, had been working for the White House Council on Environmental Quality since March.

"I am resigning my post at the Council on Environmental Quality, effective today," the newspaper quotes Jones as saying in a statement dated September 5 but released shortly after midnight on September 6.

Jones went on to say that on the eve of historic fights for health care and clean energy, "opponents of reform have mounted a vicious smear campaign" against him, according to the report.

"They are using lies and distortions to distract and divide," he continued. "But I came here to fight for others, not for myself. I cannot in good conscience ask my colleagues to expend precious time and energy defending or explaining my past. We need all hands on deck, fighting for the future."

Jones became the focus of public attention last week when it was revealed that he had signed a petition that questioned whether officials in the administration of former president George W. Bush "may indeed have deliberately allowed 9/11 to happen, perhaps as a pretext for war," The Post said.

It was also revealed that Jones used a crude term to describe Republicans in a speech he gave before joining the administration, the newspaper said.

As a result, several prominent Republicans demanded action against Jones. Republican Representative Mike Pence on Friday called on the adviser to resign or be fired, The Post said.

Jones' extremist views and coarse rhetoric have no place in this administration or the public debate," Pence said, according to the report.

Sale of drug

FROM PAGE 1 Hossain after a meeting with the pharmaceutical companies at the health ministry yesterday.

He said under the direct supervision of the Drug Administration, civil surgeons and upazila nirbahi officers, the pharmacies would be selected for selling the drug.

Three pharmacies will get permission in upazila level to sell the drug and five pharmacies in district level while 50 pharmacies in Dhaka City Corporation and 10 in other metropolitan cities each.

"Currently sixteen districts have been affected by the swine flu that may spread more during the upcoming Eid as a large number of people will go to their village home leaving Dhaka. Therefore, the decision has been taken to make the drug available in the country," he said.

Asked about the availability of the antiviral drug of Popular Pharma at local pharmacies, Monir Hossain said a circular was issued in 2007 addressing five pharmaceutical companies that the drug could not be sold in local markets.

"But as Popular Pharma got registration in April, 2008, and its name was not mentioned in that circular and so it is marketing this drug," said the DG adding that the government would amend the circular saying that the drug could be sold under the 'controlled market' with the prescription of registered medical practitioners.

He warned that stern action would be taken against those who would breach the government's order.

Actually a very few people would need the antiviral drug as 90-95 percent swine flu infected people get well without receiving the drug but he said the drug is needed only for patients who are in critical condition.

Prof Nazrul Islam, virologist and former vice chancellor of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujib Medical University, stressed the need for strong monitoring to prevent misuse of the antiviral drug.

At a round table discussion on swine flu held at the office of the Prothom Alo, he said wearing mask is a must to prevent the infection of swine flu.

"At the same time, personal hygiene should be maintained strictly and the government should take more precautionary measures to combat the attack of the virulent H1N1 virus," he added.



The bullet-riddled SUV of Awami League President Sheikh Hasina.

FILE PHOTO

Aug 21 attack

FROM PAGE 1

pellets," reads the report that was also tagged with the charge sheet.

"Mahbub, one of her personal staff, was protecting her in the shield and he was felled by a bullet near her vehicle, net by a 'largesplinter'."

Interestingly, ballistic experts' opinion in the charge sheet contradicts the INTERPOL findings.

The CID experts said the marks on the then opposition leader's jeep are not left by bullets. Rather, they had been caused by spherical metallic balls used in a special type of grenade.

Asked why he included in his charge sheet the diametrically opposed opinions of local and INTERPOL experts, ASP Fazlul Kabir said he did this because he did not want to draw any conclusion of his own.

Queried what in his opinion explains the scars more logically, he said he subscribes to the views of their ballistic experts.

Talking to The Daily Star on Thursday, he went on to dismiss the INTERPOL findings as an "international blunder."

Kabir, who took over as IO during the caretaker government rule, said, "We brought the damaged jeep to our office and examined it minutely. I think our experts' report is more authentic and acceptable."

About death of Hasina's personal staff Mahbub, he said the post-mortem report says his body bore no bullet wounds.

Fairness and credibility of the August 21 grenade blasts investigation came into question from the outset.

A few grenades were found unexploded on Bangabandhu Avenue and adjacent places even hours after the attack.

But most of those were diffused by a 35-member army team led by a captain in the early hours of August 22.

Investigators and explosives experts with experience of terror investigation say destroying the grenades soon after the attack was a mistake.

Those could have helped the investigators get to the source of the grenades, said an explosive expert on condition of anonymity.

Three former CID officials who were in charge of probe during the BNP-led four-party rule now face criminal proceedings for misleading the investigation.

They are former investigators Abdur Rashid, Munshi Atiqur Rahman and ex-supervising officer of the case Ruhul Amin.

Fazlul Kabir filed the case against them.

A Dhaka court has lately ordered further investigation after the prosecution moved a prayer arguing that the investigation is incomplete as it has not traced the source of the grenades.

The reported gunfire on Hasina's vehicle had become an issue with the then-ruling alliance and law enforcers trying to establish no shooting took place on August 21.

Speaking in return for anonymity, some investigators at that told The Daily Star that two teams of gunmen opened fire on the AL president's speeding jeep soon after the blasts.

Govt review

FROM PAGE 16

Quraishi, also a ruling Awami League lawmaker, said the parliamentary committee may fix a timeframe - perhaps of one month - for receiving applications from such victims.

"But the committee may not consider applications against disciplinary actions taken during the period," he added.

The move to reinstate these defence officials has meanwhile triggered a debate in the armed forces with a few retired army officials saying, "If deprived officials are reinstated, what about others who accepted the same fate earlier?"

The committee yesterday also discussed bringing Bangladesh under radar coverage.

Lawmakers Jamiruddin Sircar, Mujibur Haque, MA Mannan, Nurul Majid Mahmud Humayun, among others, and the chiefs of the three forces attended the meeting presided over by committee Chairman M Idris Ali.

War crime trial

FROM PAGE 16

Lawyers and investigators. The court will be set up at a well-secured and protected building, he added.

The law minister said the government has already got support from different countries and international agencies in this regard.

"There is no pressure from any country for not holding the trial of war crimes," he said.

Shafique Ahmed said those found guilty of committing offences against humanity during the liberation war would be put into trial.

Nobody will be harassed with any political intention in the name of trial of the war criminals, he added.

Correction

FROM PAGE 16

Muslim Hall of Dhaka University.

A few of our readers, including some of late Saifur Rahman's contemporaries, made phone calls yesterday providing us with few corrections to the facts given in that story.

According to them, Saifur was not the vice-president of any Dhaka University hall at that time but was elected a member of Sir Salimullah Muslim Hall Students' Union in 1951.

The Daily Star had taken the information on Saifur, including that of his becoming a VP of a hall, from the Jatiya Sangsad's biographical book on lawmakers of the last parliament. However, we inadvertently interpreted the name of the hall to be Fazlul Huq Muslim Hall although it was mentioned as Dhaka Muslim Hall in the book.

We stand corrected.

Two more killed

FROM PAGE 16

The party members opened fire on police when they were asked to surrender, police said. As the police retaliated, a gunfight ensued that left Hanu dead.

His accomplices, however, managed to flee the scene. Police recovered a gun and five bullets from the spot.

Hanu was accused in several cases including three for murder fired in Kushtia and Chaudanga police stations.

In Faridpur, a detective team of Rab came across a gang of robbers at Haat Krishnapur at about 3:30am. Sensing the presence of law enforcers, the gang took shelter in Krishnapur Primary School and opened fire on Rab personnel prompting them to retaliate.

After the incident, Topu's body was sent to Faridpur Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy.

He was convicted in 13 cases including a murder case.

FRAUD IN AFGHAN ELECTION Votes from 447 polling stations cancelled

AFP, Kabul

The votes from 447 polling stations in Afghanistan's controversial elections have been cancelled because of fraud, an electoral official said yesterday.

"Votes from 447 polling stations across the country have been nullified because of fraud," Noor Mohammed Noor, spokesman for the Independent Election Commission (IEC) told AFP.

He said the cancelled votes from the 447 polling stations -- each of which had around 600-700 ballot papers -- accounted for a not insignificant number of the total votes cast.

"It could be around 200,000 votes," he said.

The August 20 poll was Afghanistan's second only presidential election, held under a darkening cloud of corruption.

Partial results released Sunday showed President Hamid Karzai holding a clear lead, with 48.6 percent of the vote.

IEC officials announced results from 75 percent of the polling stations, with 4.3 million valid votes.

Karzai won 2.08 million and former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah 1.36 million or 31.7 percent, IEC official Daud Ali Najafi told a news conference.

The independent Electoral Complaints Commission is investigating more than 2,000 complaints of fraud and vote-rigging, around a third of which it has said could affect the outcome.

Preliminary results have been delayed -- the IEC failed to give a reason -- and final results are not due to be released before September 17.

Karzai is still short of the 50 percent plus one vote needed to secure an outright victory and avoid a run-off, which 'many observers have warned could be damaging if turnout proves lower a second time around.

Najafi said results from 447 polling stations had been cancelled because of "irregularities."

The independent Election Complaints Commission (ECC) has received more than 2,000 complaints about fraud and vote-rigging, about a third of which it has said could alter the final result.

The results have been delayed by the IEC, which has veered from its original timetable under which preliminary

results were to be released between September 3 and 7.

An IEC spokeswoman said Sunday she had "no idea" when the preliminary results would be released. Final results are due on September 17.

Even once preliminary figures are released, full results will have to wait until the allegations of irregularities are investigated by the ECC.

The commission on Saturday cancelled the release of the latest tranche of results blaming technical problems.

Throughout the laborious process of piecemeal announcements, the two main contenders for the presidency have each claimed victory.

Abdullah, formerly foreign minister, has also alleged widespread vote-rigging by Karzai's camp and has threatened to reject any result he regards as compromised.

He warned on Saturday that "state-engineered vote" fraud could fuel instability and Taliban insurgency and urged the international community to intervene.

"We have insecurity in this country. We have bad government. We have corruption. We have narcotics. We have a war. We have an insurgency," Abdullah told a news conference in Kabul.

He said a rigged election would hand another "excuse" to the increasingly deadly insurgency against the Western-backed Afghan authorities and foreign troops.

There have been fears that the results could effectively divide the country. Abdullah has his powerbase in the north, among ethnic Tajiks, while Karzai is influential in the Pashtun-dominated south.

Nato and Western allies have stressed in recent days their long-term commitment to keeping troops in Afghanistan to fight a resurgent Taliban, despite concerns about fraud and low turnout in the elections.

A Nato air strike in northern Kunduz province on Friday, which officials said killed scores of people, revived controversy over Western military operations that kill civilians as well as the intended insurgent targets.

A local official said 54 people had been killed in the strike, as well as another two who were murdered by Taliban militants just before.

Rental terms revised

FROM PAGE 1

The relaxation came as local influential businessmen mounted pressure on the government to give power plant developers more time.

The ministry also extended the period of operation of the rental plants to five years from three years following the demand from local businessmen.

Experts say prolonged purchase of power from rental power plants will jeopardise payment capacity of Power Development Board (PDB) as the prices of rented power can be two to three times higher than that of conventional power plants.

A bidder must have past experience of developing a 30-MW rental or independent power project (IPP) to qualify for a 100-MW bid. This means bidders without any experience will not be entertained although some local lobbyists were putting pressure on the PDB to entertain such bidders.

Despite pressure from lobbyists to ease penalty clauses for bidders' failure, the ministry decided to maintain the provision of slapping on contractors a fine of \$500 a megawatt for each day's failure in launching power plant.

The ministry has also kept a provision for termination of contract if a bidder fails to complete its rental power project after three months of the deadline.

The bidders will deposit bid bond at a rate of \$5000 a megawatt.

The meeting however could not decide on several vital issues including whether the bidder should own power plant equipment instead of making a promise to purchase those, whether the bidder should handle the fuel itself instead of the PDB and whether a bidder will be allowed to sign multiple rental power contracts.

The issues are likely to be finalised at a meeting today in the form of Request for Proposal (RFP) for the tender, sources said.

The PDB will float tender for the rental plants on September 10 with a target of awarding the contracts by November 19 this year.

The rental plants are: a 100-MW diesel-fired plant in Bheramara and three 50-MW diesel plants in Rajshahi, Thakurgaon and Syedpur. At the same time there will be two 100-MW HFO plants in Madanganj, Jessore, a 50-MW HFO plant in Barisal and a 30-MW HFO plant in Jamalpur.

The PDB has proposed setting up these eight rental power plants to be implemented by mid-2010.

Four large 500-MW coal-based power projects are also expected to be implemented by 2013.

Sources said the ministry and the PDB are facing tremendous pressure from the business lobby that wants to have all power projects whether they qualify for the job or not.

Two previous governments between September 2006 and April 2008 awarded four rental power contracts for a total of 167 megawatt to inexperienced local companies for a 15-year term. Of them, one failed to launch its 51-MW plant.

Last year, the caretaker government awarded eight more three-year rental power contracts except one to local inexperienced companies. Of them, four managed to launch operation while the rest with a total capacity of 180 MW failed to start operation as per the schedule.

Power Secretary Abul Kalam Azad, Energy Secretary Mohammad Mohsin and PDB Chairman ASM Alamgir Kabir, among others, were present at the meeting.

Facts & Tips

FROM PAGE 1

Ruhul Haque. It is best not to report to a hospital since you could spread the disease. Patients of cancer, diabetes, obese, heart disease, asthma, pregnant women, and children should be more careful if they have developed these symptoms. They can visit a doctor.

LAB TEST

The health ministry stopped conducting laboratory test, which is only available at the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) at Mohakhali.

REDUCE THE RISK OF CATCHING OR SPREADING FLU Wash your hands frequently with soap and water.

Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing. Use tissues. Dispose of used tissues carefully.

Clean hard surfaces (eg kitchen worktops, door handles) frequently with antiseptic cleaner.

HOSPITALS PREPARED TO DEAL WITH THE FLU IN DHAKA Dhaka Medical College

and Hospital Sir Salimullah Medical College and Mitford Hospital, Babu Bazar Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College and Hospital, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar National Institute for Disease of Chest and Hospital, Mohakhali Infectious Diseases Hospital, Mohakhali Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, Shahbagh BIRDEM, Shahbagh Bangladesh Medical College and Hospital, Dhanmondi Road-14/A Uttara Adhunik Hospital, Uttara Holy Family Red Crescent Medical College and Hospital, Eskaton Garden Road Dhaka National Medical College and Hospital, Ray Saheb Bazar, Sutrapur Dhaka Shishu Hospital, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Shahabuddin Medical College and Hospital, Gulshan-2 Mohanagar Shishu Hospital, Lalbagh Mohanagar General Hospital, Naya Bazar 95 City Corporation Health Care Centres run by NGOs in the capital