



An Indian commuter walks past a wall mural in memory of the November 2008 terror attack victims in Mumbai yesterday. Last week's deadly bomb blast in western Indian city Pune, which killed 11 people in a packed restaurant, has thrown a cloud over the scheduled resumption of Indo-Pak peace talks that were suspended in the wake of the November 2008 Mumbai attacks.

PHOTO: AFP

Taliban using human shields to slow US-led offensive

AP, Marjah

Taliban fighters are increasingly using civilians as human shields in the assault on the southern town of Marjah, an Afghan official said yesterday as military squads resumed painstaking house-to-house searches in the Taliban stronghold.

About 15,000 Nato and Afghan troops are taking part in the offensive around Marjah, which has an estimated 80,000 inhabitants and was the largest town in southern Helmand province under Taliban control. Nato hopes to rush in aid and public services as soon as the town is secured to try to win the loyalty of the population.

With the assault in its fifth day, insurgents are firing at Afghan troops from inside or next to compounds where women and children appear to have been ordered to stand on a roof or in a window, said Gen Mohiudin Ghorri, the brigade commander for Afghan troops in Marjah.

"Especially in the south of Marjah, the enemy is fighting from compounds where soldiers can very clearly see women or children on the roof or in a second-floor or third-floor window," Ghorri said. "They

are trying to get us to fire on them and kill the civilians."

The Marjah offensive is the biggest joint operation since the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan and is a major test of a retooled Nato strategy to focus on protecting civilians, rather than killing insurgents.

Ghorri said troops have made choices either not to fire at the insurgents with civilians nearby or had to target and advance much more slowly in order to distinguish between militants and civilians as they go.

Even with such caution on both the Nato and Afghan side, civilians have been killed. Nato has confirmed 15 civilian deaths in the operation. Afghan rights groups say at least 19 have been killed.

In northern Marjah Wednesday, US Marines fanned out through poppy fields, dirt roads and side alleys to take control of a broader stretch of area from insurgents as machine gun fire rattled in the distance.

The Marines found several compounds that had primitive drawings on their walls depicting insurgents blowing up tanks or helicopters, a sign that Afghan troops say revealed strong Taliban sup-

port in the neighbourhood.

A day earlier, Marines and Afghan forces moving by land from the north had succeeded in linking up with US units that have faced nearly constant Taliban attack in the four days since they were dropped by helicopter into this insurgent stronghold in southern Afghanistan.

The linkup between the two Marine rifle companies and their Afghan army partners will enable the US to expand its control in Marjah, about 610km south west of Kabul.

A top Taliban commander, Mullah Abdul Razaq Akhund, dismissed the offensive as Nato propaganda and said on the group's Web site that Marjah was militarily insignificant.

Four Nato service members have been killed in the Marjah operation. An American and a Briton were killed on Saturday, while two others whose nationalities were not identified were killed Tuesday. One Afghan soldier also died Tuesday, Afghan officials said.

The Marines and Afghan troops "saw sustained but less frequent insurgent activity" in Marjah on Wednesday, limited mostly to small-scale attacks, Nato said in a statement.

Pak govt makes U-turn over judge appointment

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's government was forced into an embarrassing U-turn yesterday, withdrawing the appointments of top judges that sparked a showdown with the Supreme Court and a fresh crisis in the country.

The row flared when President Asif Ali Zardari appointed two senior judges last week. The Supreme Court swiftly suspended the nominations, on the grounds that the head of state had apparently violated the constitution.

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani announced the U-turn following talks between and Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry.

Gilani said that Justice Khawaja Muhammad Sharif, whom the president last Saturday appointed to the Supreme Court, would stay in position as head of the high court in Pakistan's second city of Lahore.

Instead three alternative judges, Saqib Nisar, Asif Saeed Khosa and Khalil ur Rehman Ramday had been appointed to the Supreme Court, he said.

"The decisions that we took today are part of

a consultation process, which requires meaningful and result-oriented discussion for the appointments as part of the constitutional requirement," Gilani told reporters.

"Tensions have now eased out," he said, adding the government will fill all vacant judge posts in the superior judiciary today.

Strained ties with the influential judiciary weaken the Western-backed government at a time of mounting US pressure on the country to eliminate Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked militants along its border with Afghanistan.

On Monday, hundreds of lawyers rallied across Pakistan, denouncing Zardari and went on strike in the capital Islamabad and the major cities of Lahore, Peshawar, Karachi and Quetta.

"The government had made a mistake by appointing judges without consulting the chief justice, which it corrected today," former deputy attorney general Raja Abdur Rehman told AFP.

Analysts said Zardari's eligibility as president could be challenged if he was found in violation of the constitution, and had suggested that a U-turn on the appointments was his only way out of the crisis.

Pakistan-based group claims Pune bombing

AFP, New Delhi

A previously unknown Islamist group that said it had splintered from a larger Pakistan-based outfit has claimed responsibility for a weekend attack in India, a newspaper reported yesterday.

The Hindu, a respected Indian newspaper, said it had been contacted by someone claiming to be a spokesman for a group called Lashkar-e-Taiba al-Almi which said it had carried out the bombing.

Police said Wednesday the toll from the blast at the German Bakery restaurant in the western city of Pune had risen to 11, with the number of injured rising to 60 after new victims were discovered in local hospitals.

The latest fatality was a 20-year-old engineering student

who died from burns at a hospital in Pune on Tuesday night.

The Hindu said an individual codenamed Abu Jindal rang the paper's Islamabad correspondent and said the attack was in response to India's "refusal" to discuss the disputed region of Kashmir, claimed by Pakistan and India, in peace talks due to resume this month.

The caller said Lashkar-e-Taiba al-Almi had split from the larger Lashkar-e-Taiba because the latter "took its orders from Pakistan's intelligence agency", The Hindu reported.

The banned Lashkar-e-Taiba is blamed by India for the attacks on Mumbai in November 2008 which killed 166 people and led to a suspension of dialogue between India and Pakistan.



PHOTO: AFP

Rescued child labourers hold placards and shout slogans during a protest in New Delhi yesterday. Hundreds of rescued labourers participated in a march demanding that the government allocate 6 percent of the country's GDP on education and avoid privatisation of education, according to the organisers.

Massive plan on roads

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government has been working to build a pro-people, safe, cheap, multi-dimensional, environmentally friendly, sustainable, coordinated and efficient communication network," the premier said.

Hasina, also the leader of the House, said the government has taken a project involving Tk 2,383 crore to upgrade Dhaka-Chittagong highway to four lanes.

A work order has already been awarded to construct 192.3 kilometre roads for Tk 1,655 crore under the project.

The premier said initiatives are underway to find investors for construction of the second Dhaka-Chittagong four-lane highway under BOOT/BOT/PPP considering growing number of commercial and passenger transport.

"The communications ministry had also taken initiatives to upgrade national highways to four lanes under BOT/BOOT/PPP," she added.

The prime minister said the government has taken eight projects involving Tk 2, 229 crore to expand road links across the country under the Roads and Highways department. A total of Tk 210 crore was allocated for the current financial year to this effect.

Reconstruction of 48-km Dhaka bypass for Tk 52 crore is underway to ease traffic congestion in the capital. It will be opened to commuters soon, Hasina said.

She said the government has taken measures to introduce BRTC buses for school-children in the city to reduce

trafficjam.

"Dhaka Transport Coordination Board is conducting feasibility study for introducing bus rapid transit on Uttara-Sadarghat route," Hasina said. The government has decided to change DTCB to Dhaka Mass Transit Authority to make it effective.

Mentioning introduction of e-ticket on Mirpur-Motijheel route, the premier said it will be introduced on all city routes in phases. Hasina said her government has moved to procure 800 CNG-runs buses in the capital.

"As part of a major move to reduce tailbacks in the capital, measures were taken to construct elevated expressway and metro rail. Pre-qualification notice was published in newspapers to select investors for constructing the expressway," the premier said.

She said the construction of 6.15 km Padma Bridge at Mawa for \$2.4 billion will begin by September this year. Besides, the government has taken initiative to construct second Padma multipurpose bridge at Paturia-Goalanda point.

Hasina said efforts have been made to construct 1,550-metre Bikutia Bridge for easy transport of goods between Mongla port and Barisal and also an eight-kilometre link road from Chasara to Muktarpur in Munshiganj.

The premier said the government has approved 31 projects involving Tk 3,686 crore to complete construction of 51 bridges under the Roads and Highways depart-

ment.

Besides, Eastern Bangladesh Bridge Improvement Project involving Tk 690.90 crore was approved to reconstruct 136 old bridges across the country.

"The government has made a move to construct Kalna bridge and improve roads on Benapole-Jessore-Narail-Vatipara and Bogra-Natore routes under the Tk 1,700 crore Transport Corridor Improvement Project with the assistance of Asian Development Bank," Hasina said.

On expansion of railway network, she said the government made plans to set up railway tracks on Padma bridge to connect Tungipara, Jessore, and Barisal with Dhaka. It also plans to construct railway lines from Dohazari to Cox's Bazar via Ramu and from there to Gundum.

About remodelling and development of 26 railway stations including those in Dhaka, Sylhet and Rajshahi, she said agreements on seven projects involving Tk 458.24 crore were signed while those on two more projects involving Tk 210.63 crore will be inked soon.

She told parliament that sale of railway tickets and reservation of seats through cell phones will be introduced soon.

"The government has decided to ratify an agreement signed during the tenure of the last caretaker government for connecting Bangladesh with the Trans Asian Railway Network," the premier said.

Rome meet vows to win

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The Italian president made it clear before the huge gathering of several hundred government ministers, officials, policymakers, agriculturists, economists and experts representing over 165 countries that "new food emergencies cannot be ruled out given the reality of the global financial crisis and high prices of agricultural commodities".

President Napolitano emphasised the need for providing smallholding farmers, who hold the future of world's food security, the proper agricultural technologies.

"With over one billion people in hunger, we have no time to lose. Actions for ensuring food security must go in a comprehensive and sustained manner," said Ban Ki-moon. He emphasised the need for doing a lot for the wellbeing of the small and marginal farmers before the world leaders con-

verge September next in New York for the Millennium Development Goal Summit.

IFAD President Kanayo F Nwanze said, "The food crisis of 2008 and 2009, although somewhat abated in recent months, is nonetheless a reminder of the fragile underpinnings of global food security. It is indeed possible that the crisis could surface once again."

The IFAD president said, "With a projected world population of 7.5 billion in 2030 and 9.1 billion in 2050, who will feed the world if we do not support a radical paradigm shift that seeks to make agriculture and farming profitable and attractive business?"

The IFAD council meeting would have panel discussions early today (BST) and separate sessions on import issues concerning smallholding farmers, climate change and farm productivity.

Recruitment stuck

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"One of them had also given Tk 1 lakh to the chairman... I did not. This is illegal," he told The Daily Star.

Around five lakh candidates vied for 6,391 posts on January 1 by sitting written tests.

Results were published within a week and the oral examinations took place from January 23 to February 2.

The results of the oral examinations are yet to be published.

"When the corrupt officials realised that those who paid bribes did not pass the written exam, they created chaos and eventually the recruitment process was halted," said a senior official from DGHS.

The official declined to speak further on the matter as the director general is currently investigating.

Before holding the oral exam, the DGHS received more than 20,000 recommendations from various levels of the government.

Officials from the DGHS had at the time expressed concerns that the oral examinations could not be held fairly under such circumstances.

Although the health ministry ordered the DGHS to complete the recruitment process by February 6, the DGHS failed to do so.

The DGHS subsequently applied to the ministry for two more months to complete the process.

The health ministry is yet to form an investigation committee concerning the allegations.

Of a total of 20,909 posts,

some 7,000 health assistant posts have been vacant for the last few years.

The last recruitment drive for health assistants took place in 2004.

Health assistants are engaged in birth registration, health campaigns, maternal and child health care and vitamin A campaigns at the ward level.

The overburdened health assistants also serve the community clinics that were recently reopened by the government.

Director General of the DGHS Prof Shah Monir Hossain said the government is still looking into the complaints.

"The ministry will hold a meeting to discuss the complaints within the next couple of days," he said.

"We hope to publish the results shortly," he added.

In three districts--Gaibandha, Joypurhat and Rangpur, exams could not take place due to demands for more seats in the freedom fighters quota.

When contacted, Prime Minister's Health Adviser Prof Syed Modasser Ali said he knows about such allegations. "I have discussed the issue with the authorities concerned just the other day. I had said the government's image will be damaged if the issue is not addressed properly," he told The Daily Star last night.

Meanwhile, sources in the health ministry said Health Minister AFM Ruhul Haque himself is dealing the issue.

The minister could not be contacted for his comments despite repeated attempts.

Abed conferred knighthood

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tackling poverty and empowerment.

The investiture ceremony was held by Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales. Prince Charles represented Queen Elizabeth II in the ceremony.

While conferring the knighthood to Abed, Prince Charles recalled his visit to Brac in Bangladesh and thanked him for his long service in reducing poverty.

Leaders from around the world have congratulated Abed on his Knighthood.

Abed is the first person of Bangladesh origin honoured with a Knighthood by the British Crown since 1947. Abed's wife, Sarwat Abed, and daughter and son, Tamara and Shamran, were present at the ceremony at Buckingham Palace.

Abed received knighthood for his work spanning four decades in education, health, human rights and social development and for bringing financial services to the doorstep of millions of the poor in an effort to eradicate poverty in

Bangladesh and countries in Asia and Africa.

Abed is the second person in his family to be honoured with a knighthood. His grand uncle, Justice Nawab Syed Shamsul Huda, was knighted by the British Crown in 1913.

Fazle Hasan Abed was born in 1936 in Baniachong of Habiganj district. After matriculation from Pabna Zilla School and higher secondary education from Dhaka College, he attended Glasgow University to study Naval Architecture.

On returning home, he joined Shell Oil Company. While in Shell, the devastating cyclone of 1970 hit the coastal regions of Bangladesh, killing 300,000 people, which had a profound effect on Abed.

When independence war started, circumstances forced Abed to leave the country. He found refuge in England, where he set up Action Bangladesh to lobby for his country's independence with the governments of Europe.

When the war ended in December 1971, Abed returned to Bangladesh and decided to

use the funds he had generated from selling his flat in London to initiate his own.

He selected the remote region of Sullia in northeastern Bangladesh to start his work. This work led him and his organisation, Brac.

In 2002, Brac went international by taking its range of development interventions to Afghanistan. Since then, Brac has expanded to a total of eight countries across Asia and Africa.

Its work has been recognised internationally through awards such as the \$1.5 million Conrad N Hilton Humanitarian Prize in 2008 as well as the Swadhinata Puroshkar in 2007.

For his contribution to society, Abed received Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 1980, the Unicef Maurice Pate Award in 1992, the Olof Palme Prize in 2001, the UNDP Mahbub ul Haq Award for Outstanding Contribution in Human Development in 2004 and the Inaugural Clinton Global Citizen Award in 2007.

Machine-readable passport

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He said bringing in one portable machine capable of producing several hundred MRPs a day is an option. He, however, said nothing has been finalised yet and the temporary measure will deal only with urgently-needed passports.

Sources in the Department of Immigration and Passport said more than 3,000 passports are being issued every day.

The government yesterday signed a contract with the Malaysian firm to implement the Tk 526 crore project in three years. Bangladesh will take over the project in the third year.

Director General of

Department of Immigration and Passport Abdul Mabud signed the contract while Chief Operating Officer of IRIS Ronald Saade signed on behalf of his firm.

Home Secretary Abdus Sobhan Sikder, Project Director Refayet and other officials concerned were present at the ceremony held at the Department of Immigration and Passport.

Sources in IRIS said they would start importing machinery, software and booklets for MRP soon. "We need to prepare a huge set up importing hardware and software and ensure the security requirements. We will then

have user acceptance testing before going for final production," an IRIS official told The Daily Star yesterday.

The official said going for full-scale operation of the project now will require another four months, which would put many citizens in trouble.

According to International Civil Aviation Organisation, Bangladesh must start introducing MRPs and machine-readable visas from April 1 to ensure safe and risk-free foreign travel of its citizens.

No manually or hand-written passports that have been issued or renewed after the deadline will be accepted for foreign travel.