

Rebels attack Somali parliament

BBC NEWS

Islamist rebels attacked Somalia's parliament as it met for the first time this year, in clashes that led to the deaths of nine people.

Insurgents fired mortar bombs at the building in Mogadishu, triggering retaliatory shellfire from African Union peacekeepers.

There were rowdy scenes in the chamber earlier as members voted to remove the speaker, who had criticised the PM.

The rebels have fought a three-year war against the fragile interim government.

They launched yesterday's attack from their stronghold in the capital's main market at Bakara.

A police official told news agency Reuters that some mortars had landed near the parliament, but there had been no direct hits.

More than 20 people were injured in the crossfire as AU soldiers guarding MPs fired back with artillery.

Parts of Bakara market caught fire and several shopkeepers were killed, according to reports.

India, Iran to talk on gas pipeline through Pak

PTI, Tehran

After a two-year lull, India has proposed to resume talks with Iran next week on importing gas through a pipeline passing through Pakistan, but Tehran is yet to respond to the offer.

India last month proposed a meeting of the India-Iran Joint Working Group (JWG) between May 23 and 28 in New Delhi to discuss the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project, but Tehran has not yet confirmed the data, sources said.

India has been boycotting project talks since 2008 over concerns on safe delivery of gas and frequent changes in price of gas. New Delhi wants Iran to stick to the price agreed between them in 2007 and also wants it to be responsible for safe passage of gas through Pakistan.



A fresh cloud of ash rises from the volcano under the Eyjafjallajökull glacier in Iceland yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Volcanic ash cloud shuts UK, Ireland airspace

REUTERS

Ireland shut several of its airports and Britain imposed a no-fly zone on parts of its airspace yesterday as another cloud of ash from a volcano in Iceland looked set to disrupt European air travel again.

The Irish Aviation Authority (IAA) said three northwestern airports were closed from early yesterday but other hubs, such as Dublin, would remain open until later in the day.

North Atlantic overflights through Irish-controlled airspace remain unaffected despite the cloud drifting over the country. Ash spread from the same volcano in Iceland wreaked havoc on European air traffic last month.

Britain's National Air Traffic Service said a no-fly zone would be imposed over parts of Scotland and England between 1:00pm BST and 7:00pm BST yesterday due to the volcanic ash but London airports would not be affected.

Manchester, Liverpool, Doncaster, Carlisle, Humberside and East Midlands airports fall within the no-fly zone, as do all airports in Northern Ireland, NATS said. Airports in parts of Scotland and the Isle of Man will also be affected.

The government on Saturday warned that parts of British airspace might have to close until Tuesday with different parts

including the southeast, where Europe's busiest airport Heathrow is located, likely to be closed at different times.

"Long range forecasts indicate that the ash cloud may cause further disruption about to tomorrow but this is not certain," Manchester airport said in a statement.

The volcano under the Eyjafjallajökull glacier in Iceland is continuing to erupt with no signs of the explosive activity about to end and an ash plume reaching heights of 25,000 feet (7,620 metres), Britain's Met Office said.

"Winds are expected to blow mainly from the northwest for a time over the weekend with the risk of ash affecting some parts of the UK," it said.

"However, winds are predicted to swing into a south westerly direction by the middle of next week, which would take most of any ash away from the British Isles."

In Ireland, the IAA said it was carrying out observation flights at a number of altitudes and would provide an update later in the day. Dublin airport would remain open until 7:00pm BST (1800 GMT) while Shannon, an important stop-over for flights to the United States, would be open until 11:00pm BST (22:00 GMT), it added.

Elsewhere in Europe, German airlines' association said no restriction of German

air traffic was expected due to the ash, and German airlines were operating flights as normal. Airline Lufthansa said it was conducting a test flight to collect data over Europe to measure the ash concentration.

In the Netherlands, an Amsterdam Schiphol airport spokeswoman there were no expected closures in Dutch airspace.

Since then ash has periodically forced the short-term closure of parts of airspace in countries across Europe.

British Transport Minister Philip Hammond said on Saturday that from now on five-day -- rather than the previous 18-hour -- ash prediction charts would be made available to airlines and the public on the Met Office forecaster's website.

BBC adds, Dr Dougal Jerram, a volcanologist from Durham University, warned the last big eruption of Eyjafjallajökull -- in the 1820s -- went on for about two years, and its current eruption could last "several months".

But he said the continued eruptions would not necessarily cause more problems to air travel, as a number of factors -- explosive eruptions, a concentrated plume and certain weather patterns -- needed to be in place at the same time to create "the perfect storm".

Maldives offer to Guantanamo detainees

BBC NEWS

The Maldives has offered to take two detainees from the US facility in Guantanamo Bay, the Indian Ocean state's president has said.

President Mohamed Nasheed said there was "no harm" in the offer, and said it would not violate any laws.

But the move is being resisted by an opposition party, which is reported to be taking legal action against the government over its plans.

Neither of the two detainees has been named.

More than 180 detainees remain in the controversial US prison for foreign terrorism suspects in Cuba.

The Obama administration, which aims to shut down Guantanamo, has struggled to relocate detainees deemed to no longer pose a threat to US interests.

Among the latest to be moved were two who were transferred to Switzerland in March. Georgia also took two the same month.

Speaking in his weekly radio address, President Nasheed said: "It would show that we are a people who care about others as much as we can."

PAK MASS KIDNAP

'Militants' free 50 hostages

REUTERS, Parachinar

Suspected militants have released 50 people kidnapped on Saturday in Pakistan's rest northwest, a government official said yesterday.

Suspected militants dressed as policemen kidnapped at least 60 people in two incidents in the ethnic Pashtun tribal region of Kurram, where government forces have recently stepped up an anti-militant operation.

Negotiations involving tribal elders were underway for the release of the remaining 10 hostages, believed to be employees of the state power company, regional government official Muntaz Khan told Reuters.

"Militants seem reluctant to free them because they are government employees but we are making all our efforts and we have engaged tribal elders in the process," said Khan.

Pakistani government officials have accused Pakistani Taliban militants of carrying out kidnappings after coming under pressure from security crackdowns in Kurram and other areas.

Taliban officials were not immediately available for comment.

Some kidnappings in the region were believed to have been carried out by tribes.

Hameedullah Khan, a tribal elder, had a different account of what happened with the hostages, saying militants released 40, while 10 escaped. He was optimistic those still being held would be freed.

"The 10 men do not have identity cards so the Taliban are just holding them to verify their identity. It's not a big deal," Khan said.

In a video message last week, Pakistan's Taliban warned the US it will soon "burn" while calling for Pakistan's rulers to be overthrown for following "America's agenda."

Pakistani military kills 58 suspected militants

AP, Parachinar

The military killed 58 suspected militants in northwestern Pakistan on Sunday with a mix of airstrikes and ground combat, the latest violence in a months-long campaign to rout Taliban fighters from a mountainous area near the Afghan border.

The Pakistani military launched the ongoing offensive in the Orakzai tribal region in mid-March to flush out militants who last year fled an army offensive in nearby South Waziristan. Persistent artillery and aircraft attacks have killed hundreds of insurgents over the past two months, the military says.

Fighter jets and helicopter gunships attacked militant sanctuaries Sunday in the villages of Dabari, Gojar and Kamer Mela in Orakzai, killing 40 suspected insurgents, said Samiullah Khan, a senior government administrator in Orakzai.

Later in the day, troops attacked militant hide-outs in Koul village, triggering clashes that killed 18 suspected insurgents, said Jehanzeb Khan, a local administrator. Five soldiers and at least 25 militants were wounded in the fighting.

The injured militants were taken into custody, he said.

It was impossible to independently confirm the casualties and their identities because the region is remote and dangerous and media access restricted.

Thousands of people have fled the offensive in the area and many have moved in with relatives in nearby districts.

Elsewhere in Pakistan's tribal region yesterday, militants who kidnapped 60 people at gunpoint the day before released 40 of their hostages, said local administrator Rasheed Khan.

Another 10 people told the local government they managed to escape the militants, who ambushed the group in Kurram as they headed to the northwestern city of Peshawar, said Khan.

The hostages released by the militants were mostly women, children and poor men, said Khan. The kidnappers kept the wealthier men so they could demand ransom from their families, he said.

"Now the militants only have 10 people in their custody, and efforts are under way to recover them," said Khan.

Hong Kong by-elections a test for democracy camp

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong yesterday held by-elections triggered by pro-democracy lawmakers seeking to pressure Beijing into speeding up the pace of electoral reform in the territory.

The election, which has angered Beijing and divided the city's democracy movement, comes after five lawmakers from the Legislative Council quit in January in a bid to force a de facto referendum on reform.

Frustrated by what they say is China's intransigence, the lawmakers had hoped that the move -- which will likely see them all re-elected -- would send the strongest message yet to Beijing since Hong Kong returned to Chinese rule in 1997.

However, the outcome of the vote is seen as academic since all pro-Beijing political parties have boycotted the process.

Under the current electoral system, only half of Hong Kong's 60-seat legislature is directly elected while the rest is selected by the pro-China business elite. Campaigners want the entire parliament to be directly elected.

They also want voters to be able to choose the city's chief executive, who is currently appointed by a Beijing-friendly election committee.

Beijing has said that, at the earliest, Hong Kong's chief executive can be directly elected by 2017 and the legislature by 2020.

Chinese officials have blatantly denounced the "referendum", calling it a "blatant challenge" to Hong Kong's Basic Law, the city's mini-constitution that guarantees certain civil liberties for citizens of the former British colony.

Democracy figurehead Martin Tsang denounced a decision by Donald Tsang, Hong Kong's chief executive, not to cast a ballot. "This is absolutely ridiculous," the founder of Hong Kong's Democratic Party told AFP on Sunday.

"It is a total act of kow-towing to Beijing. This is the problem -- Tsang is not elected by the people."

Tsang said his decision was "purely personal".

"In view of the unique nature of this by-election and after careful consideration, I have decided not to vote," he said in a statement.

"All members of my political team share this view and, of their own accord, have also decided not to vote."

In response, "Long Hair" Leung Kwok-hung, one of the five who resigned his seat, protested outside Tsang's residence on Sunday, calling on the city's leader to vote.

Huge oil plumes found under Gulf of Mexico

AP, Robert, La

Oil from a blown-under well is forming huge underwater plumes as much as 10 miles long below the visible slick in the Gulf of Mexico, scientists said as BP wrestled for a third day yesterday for its latest contraption for slowing the nearly month-old gusher.

BP, the largest oil and gas producer in the U.S., has been unable to thread a tube into the leak to siphon the crude to a tanker, its third approach to stopping or reducing the spill on the ocean floor. Engineers remotely steering robot submersibles were trying again Sunday to fit the tube into a breach nearly a mile below the surface, BP said.

Oil has been spewing since the rig Deepwater Horizon exploded April 20, killing 11 people and sinking two days later. The government shortly afterward estimated the spill at 210,000 gallons or 5,000 barrels a day.

Brazil's Lula holds 'last chance' nuclear talks in Iran

AFP, Tehran

Iran and Brazil vowed to boost ties yesterday as Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva began a visit the West says may be Tehran's last chance to avoid new UN sanctions over its atomic programme.

Talks Tuesday morning between Lula and Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad included the nuclear standoff between major powers and Iran, a source close to the talks told AFP.

"The two leaders did discuss the nuclear issue which is a very important item on their agenda," the source said.

A member of the Brazilian delegation, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP that Brazil remained "optimistic" about the outcome of the nuclear talks.

"There are still ongoing negotiations and we have to wait until the end of the talks tomorrow [today]," the delegate said.

A statement posted on Ahmadinejad's website said that in his talks with Lula, he "thanked the Brazilian president's stance in support of Iranians' rights and the position he adopts for improving the world."

"The truth is some countries which dominate the world's media, economic and political centres do not want other countries to progress. But together we can overcome these unfair conditions and make changes," Ahmadinejad said.

In reply, Lula was quoted as telling Ahmadinejad: "Brazil regards its ties with Iran as strategic as it believes one can act stronger with each other's help."

He added: "A change to the UN Security Council is a fundamental and serious issue for a democratic management of the world."



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, right, welcomes his Brazilian counterpart Lula da Silva at the presidential offices in Tehran yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Trade ties with S Korea

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and asked for Korean cooperation in setting up technical training institutes in fields ranging from IT to nursing.

She hoped hard-working Bangladeshis could attain quality technical training at the centres and institutes, allowing them to land more high-skilled jobs in developed countries.

"During my meeting with the Korean government, I will request them to increase import of Bangladeshi products and investment in our country. At the same time I will request them to take steps so that more Bangladeshis can get scope for work here," Hasina said.

The PM also urged the expatriate community to stand by the present government in its endeavour to build a 'Digital Bangladesh'.

Expressing her government's serious commitment to ensuring development in Bangladesh, the PM said the government's drive against

corruption and terrorism will continue unabated, as her government wants to establish Bangladesh as the most peaceful and prosperous country in South Asia.

Hasina thanked the Korean government, particularly its labour ministry for introducing the Employment Permit System, through which greater numbers of Bangladeshis are now able to go to Korea more cheaply, while their salaries and benefits have also increased in comparison with the past.

The PM termed South Korea one of Bangladesh's friendliest countries, and urged Bangladeshis living and working in the country to continue their work abiding by the laws, rules and regulations of their adopted home.

"Every one of you is an ambassador of Bangladesh abroad. I request you to do your job with utmost integrity and honesty, so that the goodwill you create paves the way for more and more such

opportunities for your countrymen," Hasina said.

Regarding the various problems faced by the Bangladeshi expatriate community in Korea, as elsewhere, Hasina assured her audience that she and her government are aware of the complications they face, and are working diligently at the policy level to resolve the issues.

Hasina asked the officials of Bangladesh embassy here to prioritise working on solutions for the problems faced by Bangladeshis living in Korea, and also to cooperate with them in improving their prospects.

"The expatriates are the lifelines of our economy. Even during the global recession, our expatriate brothers and sisters did not let the flow of money they send back to our country decline. Rather, they contributed to a record amount of inward remittance into Bangladesh," the PM said.

Hasina said her govern-

ment is implementing various programmes to prioritise the welfare of the expatriate community, keeping their interests and prosperity in mind.

She noted how the process of sending money to Bangladesh has been simplified under the present administration, with Bangladeshi banks opening branches in various cities across the world, allowing expatriates to send back remittances through safe, formal channels.

Moreover, the costs associated with obtaining and renewal of passports or travel permits, as well as other consular fees have been reduced significantly for expatriates, particularly for migrant workers, she said.

Expounding on the reasons behind her visit to Seoul, the PM said she intended to take the existing friendly relations between Bangladesh and Korea to a new height.

Hasina recalled Korea was one of the first countries to recognise Bangladesh's inde-

pendence after the Liberation War of 1971.

"A nation, which has attained independence through a Liberation War cannot lag behind. Insh-Allah, through the proper implementation of plans for modernisation, the Bengali nation will establish itself as a developed nation," she said.

Hasina was honoured at the function with a speech, crests and various other presents by the Korean government and Bangladeshi expatriates.

Korean Labour Minister Yim Tea Hee, President of Korea-Bangladesh Friendship Forum Kim Choong-whan, and Bangladesh Ambassador to South Korea Shahidul Islam spoke on the occasion.

The PM's younger sister Sheikh Rehana, Commerce Minister Faruk Khan, Ambassador-at-Large M Ziauddin, and Press Secretary to the PM Abul Kalam Azad, among others, are accompanying the prime minister.

Bus crash

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Mohakhali in the capital collided head-on with a Dhaka-bound bus from Kishoreganj.

The Dhaka-bound bus toppled off the bridge and skidded down into a roadside ditch 20 feet down.

On information, Narsingdi police and a rescue team of the district firefighters rushed to the spot and dragged out nine bodies with the help of locals from the wrecked-bus.

The injured were rushed to Narsingdi Sadar Hospital and local clinics.

The condition of five injured was stated to be critical and they were sent to Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Vehicle movement on the highway was suspended nearly for two hours following the accident.

Narsingdi police chief Akkas Uddin Bhuiyan visited the spot and also paid a visit to the hospitals where the injured were admitted.

JS probe finds

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members to appear before the committee and explain their "non-cooperation".

Giving an example of corruption in purchase, a Biman official said the price of an elevator slew switch used for flight control system was shown \$7,500 in the bill while its market price was only \$235.

"It is quite clear from their activities and behaviour that the Biman's top management and the Board do not want the probe report to be made public. That's why, Biman's top officials are not cooperating with the sub-committee," Mosharraf Hossain said after a meeting at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.

The committee decided to send its two members to visit Biman's London, Rome and Dubai offices to investigate corruption. But the Biman authority and the Board are buying time on different excuses, Badal said.

The Biman's managing Director's statement and behaviour in today's meeting was totally unacceptable, said Badal, also a lawmaker of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal.

The committee decided not to use Biman's aircraft for its members to visit those offices abroad, he said.

Termining a haven of corruption, Badal said corruption has been there in every sector of the national flag carrier leaving it in a bad shape.

"You will be astonished to hear that there has been corruption in purchase of trivial materials like pin," Badal said.

On corruption involving Tk 700 crore, the sub-committee chief said they do not want to make the probe report public at this stage.

"We are about to complete the probe report and shall submit it to parliament," he added.