

HAQQANI LINK

Pakistan PM leads talks on US pressure

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan holds rare cross-party talks yesterday designed to build unity in the face of mounting American pressure to act against the al-Qaeda-linked Haqqani network or face the consequences.

The talks come after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Wednesday that the US was conducting a final review on whether to blacklist the network, which it blames for deadly attacks in Afghanistan, as a terror group.

The outgoing top US military officer, Admiral Mike Mullen, has accused Pakistan of exporting violent extremism to Afghanistan and called the Haqqani network a "veritable arm" of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency.

And given the US claims about Pakistan government ties to the network, analysts have warned there is a risk Islamabad will be branded a state sponsor of terror.

The White House on Wednesday appeared to be treading more carefully on the issue, with spokesman Jay Carney saying he would not have used the same language as Mullen, and Clinton saying the countries have to "work together".

She also said the US has already designated the key leaders of the network as terrorists, with seven members placed under US sanctions since 2008.

Unease has been growing in Pakistan over the US demands to act against the Haqqanis but Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani is expected to use the conference to try to rally support

behind the government and military rather than formulate new strategies.

American officials want Pakistan to launch an offensive against the Haqqanis, but the military says it is too over-stretched fighting local Taliban to open a new front against a US enemy that does not pose a threat to Pakistan.

Gilani's office said the conference would adopt a "joint stand on national security".

Members of Gilani's fragile coalition, the opposition and the main religious parties are expected to attend the yesterday afternoon talks. Civilian politicians will likely fall into line behind the military, considered the chief arbiter of power in Pakistan.

Top party leaders, including opposition leader Nawaz Sharif and heads of Islamic parties such as pro-Taliban cleric Fazlur Rehman have signalled that they will be there.

"All the political parties will plan a road map for the future and government will ensure implementation of this strategy," said Information Minister Firdous Ashiq Awan.

Although nothing suggests the United States is considering a unilateral ground action, Pakistanis are increasingly fearful of another American raid similar to the operation that killed Osama bin Laden on May 2.

The covert raid humiliated the army, embarrassed the government and brought relations between Pakistan and the United States to their lowest point.

More probable American action would be increased

drone strikes targeting Islamist militants in Pakistan's semi-autonomous border areas with Afghanistan, or a cut in financial aid to the cash-strapped country of 167 million.

Gilani's main ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which leads a precarious majority in parliament, faces strong domestic criticism for supporting the United States in its war on terror and providing logistical support.

Retired general turned political analyst Talat Masood told AFP that the government and the military want to defuse the latest crisis.

"The gathering is intended to send a strong signal from the country's political parties that they stand united behind the military in the wake of US pressures," he said.

"The government wants to release pressure... although everybody knows that it is the military that will decide what type of relationship it wants with the United States.

"The conference will serve as political catharsis to let passions cool off."

US allegations of Pakistan waging a proxy war in Afghanistan triggered a frenzy of anger this week with several thousand people attending rallies.

Qazi Hussain Ahmed, a senior leader in the religious Jamaat-e-Islami party told a gathering on the Afghan border that Pakistan should quit the alliance.

PPP protesters outside the US consulate in Karachi condemned the US threats and set fire to American flags.

Azhar

FROM PAGE 1 Court sources said the charge sheets will be placed before two courts on October 2 for acceptance.

Several hundred Jamaat activists on September 19 fought pitched battles with law enforcers in the capital, leaving at least 100 people injured and halting traffic for several hours. The clash erupted after police obstructed a Jamaat rally demanding release of their top leaders who are behind bars on war crimes charges.

During the clashes, the Jamaat men set fire to at least 28 vehicles, smashed around 200 others and vandalised dozens of roadside shops, police said.

Police then arrested 261 Jamaat men including Azharul and Tasneem in this connection.

Sporadic clashes also took place in other parts of the country on the day.

At least 20 cases were filed, including nine in capital's Ramna and Paltan police stations, accusing several thousand Jamaat leaders and workers of torching and damaging vehicles, destroying public properties and attacking law enforcers.

Following investigation into two cases, Jafar Ali, sub-inspector of Ramna Police Station, yesterday submitted a charge sheet against Azharul and 119 others while Paltan Police Station Sub-inspector Rafiqul Islam placed the other charge sheet accusing 200 people including Azharul.

Eighty people, including the Jamaat acting secretary general, are accused in both the cases.

Jamaat Publicity Secretary Prof Tasneem Alam and central leader Izzat Ullah are also among those charged.

Meanwhile, Azharul, Tasneem and two others yesterday obtained bail in another case filed for torching vehicles and preventing policemen from discharging their duties at Kakrail Crossing on September 20.

Padma Bridge WB-strung

FROM PAGE 1 about our evaluation," he said adding that the financiers are somehow not happy with the way the government is handling the Padma bridge project.

To keep the momentum of the project, the government even told WB that the country would like to go ahead without the company or companies accused of corruption, and therefore the bank may formally name the companies allegedly involved in irregularities. The bank has not yet responded to this request.

This is not the first time WB disrupted the project's tender process. The priority project is being delayed due to frequent intervention by and excessive bureaucracy in WB.

The bank took a year since July last year to clear a set of pre-qualified bidders for the main bridge construction.

The delay of the first six months was because the bank forced the government to go for a second pre-qualification bidding on the plea of a minor modification in the main bridge's design.

Another six months went by because the bank insisted that the government qualifies a disqualified Chinese company. After repeated scrutiny of that bidder by Tec, the bank cleared a list of five pre-qualified companies in July this year.

But since then the bank has refrained from clearing the bid document for the main bridge construction. The document was first sent to WB in October last year and then again on June 1 this year. WB was supposed to clear the document in two weeks, so that it could be distributed among the five pre-qualified bidders.

Meanwhile, the other important components of the project like \$1,200 million main bridge construction, \$700 million river

training, and \$40 million Mawa approach road construction were also delayed, and have been pending for WB's approval. The government sought WB clearance for the tender for river training back in December last year, and for the main bridge construction bid document in March this year.

"WB is taking a long time to give approval to these components against which there is no complaint," regretted a Bridges Division official.

WB Vice-president Isabel M Guerrero flew to Dhaka on September 12 to inform the government about their position on the alleged corruption in the bridge project. She reportedly told Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that they would inform her about the details of the matter later.

"Usually the World Bank seeks clarifications if there is any allegation of irregularity or corruption. But this time we are totally in the dark as they said nothing beforehand," a high official of the government told The Daily Star.

The government already spent Tk 1,036 crore for the purpose of land acquisition, resettlement, compensation, setting up a service area, and preparing the design of the bridge.

Communication Minister Syed Abul Hossain said both local and international experts have been engaged in the project to maintain transparency. He also said everything was being done strictly following the guidelines of the donors.

"We don't want to make any further delay in the Padma Bridge project. We want to start construction in January if the World Bank clears the bid document of the main bridge construction without delay," he told The Daily Star.

Asked about the corruption allegation, the minister

said, "It's up to the World Bank. We are waiting for their decision."

The 6.15km bridge over the Padma river, together with 3.68km of land-based approach viaducts on both sides of the river, will connect the country's 19 south-western districts with the capital.

The bridge will have road traffic on the upper level and train on the lower level. The main bridge structure will have a dual carriage-way, and a provision for future installation of a broad gauge rail line as well as other provisions including provisions for gas and telecommunication lines.

Ministers

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the first time in June.

In the budget speech, Finance Minister AMA Muhith said, "Questions have been raised from different quarters regarding the justification of this unequal treatment." It stands against the principle of equity in respect of imposition of tax, he said.

However, in order to implement the finance act provision, amendments have to be brought to some clauses in the Prime Minister's Honorarium Act 1975, Speaker and Deputy Speaker's Honorarium Act 1974, Ministers, State Ministers and Deputy Ministers' Honorarium Act 1973 and lawmakers' honorarium Act 1973.

An NBR high-up said they sent letters to the cabinet division and law ministry in July for bringing necessary changes to the clauses. The cabinet division has already taken initiatives to bring amendments to the act.

The official said parliament sought a clarification from the NBR on whether lawmakers have to pay tax in the current fiscal year.

The NBR sent a letter to parliament on Wednesday to clarify the issue, the official said.

India, Pakistan look to trade to reinforce peace

AFP, New Delhi

Indian and Pakistani business leaders said yesterday there were big opportunities to boost direct trade between them after the rival nations agreed to work harder at opening up their markets.

While formal trade between the two most populous and largest economies in South Asia is a paltry \$2.7 billion annually, unregulated trade, much of it routed through third countries, is estimated at \$10 billion.

This informal commerce shows "the tremendous potential for bilateral trade," said Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry secretary general Rajiv Kumar.

Cross-border commerce currently amounts to less than one percent of each country's global activity, but the two sides harbour hopes of increased trade in areas such as engineering and textiles.

"There is a large market to be opened up," said Rajan Bharti Mittal, managing director of India's Bharti Enterprises, parent of the country's largest mobile phone operator.

The comments came as India's commerce minister Anand Sharma announced he would lead a trade delegation to Islamabad next February at the invitation of his Pakistani counterpart, Makhdoom Amin Fahim.

The two agreed in New Delhi late Wednesday to more than double trade within three years to \$6 billion, set up a second trade border check post and make it easier for Indians and Pakistanis to get business visas.

Both governments "are committed to normalisation of trade relations," said Fahim, whose five-day visit at the head of a large business delegation is the first by a commerce minister to India in 35 years.

"We're already trading with each other via third nations.

This shows there is a need in both countries for each other's products," Bashir Hussain, chief executive of the Pakistan Horticulture Development and Export Company, said.

India is also eyeing improved trade ties with Pakistan as a way to gain better access to the republics of Central Asia while Pakistan is keen to tap India's vast market of 1.2 billion people.

Ashuganj used

FROM PAGE 1 27, an Indian ship carrying steel sheets reached Ashuganj river port from Khidirpur port in Kolkata.

On May 31, last year, Bangladesh and India amended the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade, and included Ashuganj as the 5th port of call in Bangladesh and Shilghat as a port of call for Bangladesh goods on the Indian side.

The amendment allowed India to carry goods to Ashuganj port by ferry. The goods then would be taken to India's north-eastern region by land.

Bangladeshi trucks and tractor-trailers will carry cargoes from ships at Sherpur and Ashuganj to the Indian border, according to the amendment.

The shipping secretary said, "According to the transshipment arrangement, Indian ships can carry goods up to Ashuganj river port from where only Bangladeshi trucks-trailers are allowed to carry those to the border."

"We are charging them [India] for using our port and warehouse facilities," he said.

But the secretary declined to give any detail. Farook Ahmed, project coordinator of Gulf Orient Seaways responsible for the transshipment, told our Brahmanbaria correspondent that another ship carrying steel sheets would reach Ashuganj river port in two days.

Torturer cop

FROM PAGE 20 Hossain, deputy police commissioner of Motijheel division.

Hazzaz is likely to face further punishment, sources in the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) said.

Meer Shahidul Islam, joint commissioner (Detective Branch) of DMP, told The Daily Star that the inspector acted "irresponsibly and non-professionally violating human rights."

Photos published in newspapers on September 23 showed that Hazzaz was stamping on the chest and throat of a man.

The man, Yusuf Ali, was also arrested on charges of vandalism during the shutdown called by BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami to press home their demands including restoration of caretaker government system.

A mobile court on the same day jailed Yusuf for one year on charges of vandalism and obstructing law enforcers from discharging their duties.

"The inspector [Hazzaz] could not give any satisfactory answers as to why he acted like that," said Shahidul, who investigated the incident.

4 pirates killed

FROM PAGE 20 movements of another trawler on the Bhoirav river near Dhanichabari of the upazila, said Lt Col Monirul Haque, commanding officer of Rab-8, who led the operation.

The Rab team challenged the trawler. Within some time, passengers from that trawler fired on the law enforcers, prompting them to fire back. At one stage of the firing, the pirates entered a canal of the Sundarbans forest, anchored their trawler and fled.

Later, the Rab members recovered four bullet-ridden bodies from deep into the forest.

Six Indian-made and five Myanmar-made guns, one pistol, 24 bullets, eight cartridges, six sharp weapons and Tk 1 lakh cash were also recovered from the trawler of the pirates, Rab sources said.

Local fishermen identified the dead as members of notorious pirate gang Raju Bahini which regularly collects toll from fishermen in the coastal areas.

Teesta river

FROM PAGE 20 September 6-7 was postponed as Paschimbanga Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee virtually vetoed the deal and pulled herself out from being in Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's entourage.

When asked about any specific timeframe of the next meeting with India regarding the Teesta deal, the secretary said, "We have asked to settle a date for the meeting. The meeting will be held at our [both countries] convenience," he added.

The two sides are expected to exchange the data before sitting for the next Joint River Commission meeting on the Teesta water-sharing deal.

"We expect them to provide us the data through the technical level committee of the commission," he said.

Bangladesh will asked for the hydrological data of the Teesta through the foreign ministry, said a source from the ministry of water resources.

Queried about Bangladesh's response to Indian demand for Teesta's

hydrological data of last 15 years at Teesta barrage point, he said, "We are preparing a report with 15 years' data."

The water resources ministry has already asked Bangladeshi officials in the Joint River Commission to prepare a report on how much water was available at Teesta Barrage point in the last 15 years, sources said.

Water Resources Minister Ramesh Chandra Sen issued the directive to the officials Tuesday after India asked for the data before they sit with Bangladesh to resolve the Teesta water-sharing issue.

New Delhi asked for daily records of water availability of every 10 alternative days in the lean periods since 1996, ministry sources say.

Mir Sazzad Hossain, member of the JRC, received a letter from senior joint secretary of Indian water resources ministry TS Mehra on September 15 asking about the data. TS Mehra mentioned in the letter that they want to sign the Teesta and Feni water deals with Bangladesh as soon as possible.

However, many think that the Teesta deal will be

delayed further as India sought the data after finalising the draft deal. A news item run by the Anandabazar Patrika in Kolkata on September 22 made the uncertainty of the Teesta deal more apparent.

Quoting Paschimbanga Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, the daily reported that Mamata had earlier agreed to share 25 percent water of the Teesta but she is now not so sure about that either after visiting Sikkim where she observed that there was scarcity of water. The paper said Mamata informed the Indian central government of the matter.

The Anandabazar report said the Paschimbanga provincial government formed an expert committee to review the flow of the Teesta water. And Mamata would talk to the central government after getting the report of the committee.

Bangladesh and India have been discussing the Teesta water-sharing deal for decades. Out of 54 trans-boundary rivers, the two neighbours so far have signed only the Ganges water sharing agreement.

Death toll hits 79 in Indian floods

AFP, Bhubaneswar

The death toll from severe flooding in the eastern Indian state of Orissa has risen to 79 with an estimated five million people affected, local officials said on Wednesday.

Two bouts of extremely heavy rain this month have led rivers to burst their banks, submerging thousands of villages and leading to a relief effort from local and international aid agencies.

"At least 79 people are confirmed dead from the two phases of heavy flooding. I'm afraid the toll might go up," Orissa Disaster Management Minister Surya Naayan Patra told AFP.

"We now have close to five million flood-affected people spread across 19 of state's 30 districts needing relief and rehabilitation. The government is trying its best," he added.

Over 170,000 people living in low-lying areas in the worst-affected areas near the coast have been evacuated, but 3,460 villages remain water-logged, he said.

The weather has improved in recent days as India approaches the end of its rainy season and the flood waters are starting to recede.

Tasnim

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him, he said. Amirul Islam, the counsel for former BDR deputy assistant director Towhidul Islam who is the prime accused in the case relating to the carnage, argued human lives are more important than chain of command.

Lt Col Tasnim did not explain why he failed to send message to other sectors, battalions, outposts and his sub-ordinates.

He said to have talked with Directorate General of Forces Intelligence's Col Arif, Col Moshihur, Maj Tareq and Subedar Major Ansari over his mobile phone at different times on February 25. But he did not inform them about the killing of Maj Gazzali.

"Before my mobile phone was snatched away from me, I had tried to disseminate the information [Gazzali's killing], but failed to contact anyone." The phone was later recovered from China Begum, wife of sepoy Zillur.

In his September 21 statement, Tasnim said he quickly hid himself behind a building at Pilkhana on February 25 seeing some BDR soldiers beat Maj Gazzali.

Within a few minutes, he heard someone groaning after two or three gunshots. Coming out of the hideout he saw a few armed jawans taking away the body of Gazzali in a sack.

As Amirul Islam was asking whether Tasnim mentioned about the mobile phone in his statement recorded by the investigation officer, the prosecution witness repeatedly said it was in his verbal statement.

At this stage, the lawyer got furious and reprimanded Tasnim.

The cross-examination of the witness will continue when the trial resumes on October 5.

A total of 824 Bangladesh Rifles (renamed Border Guard Bangladesh) jawans and 23 civilians are accused in the carnage case.

HR boss

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If necessary, NHRC will move to the High Court against the IG prisons, he said while talking to reporters yesterday.

Jailer Nesar Alam Mukul quoted the IG prisons as saying that without prior permission from the home ministry, one cannot visit the prison.

Mizan, however, told The Daily Star that as per the 2009 act, the commission staff can visit any place like prison without any prior approval.

The commission will suggest that the government should check whether human rights are being violated in jails and other government institutions, and take steps to improve the HR situation in them, Mizan said.

Now comes toy plane attack plot

FROM PAGE 20 Pentagon and the US Capitol, authorities said.

Rezwan Ferdous, 26, was arrested and charged with plotting aerial and ground attacks on Washington and supporting a foreign terrorist organisation, US Attorney Carmen Ortiz said in Boston.

He is also accused of modifying mobile phones for use as electrical switches in bombs to be used against US troops in Iraq.

He was arrested after he bought what he believed to be 25 pounds of plastic explosives, three grenades, six automatic assault rifles and even an F-86 remote-controlled aircraft from undercover FBI agents posing as al-Qaeda operatives.

The explosives and guns were provided Wednesday

just before his arrest, law enforcement officials said.

Ferdous bought one small drone aircraft and planned to buy others which he hoped to fill with explosives and fly into Pentagon and Capitol from a park along the Potomac River, they added.

Authorities described Ferdous as a physics graduate from Northeastern University who was an enthusiastic fan of al-Qaeda and had been committed to "violent jihad" since early last year.

Little personal information was given out about the accused man, other than that he is unmarried and has no children. According to IANS, he used to play drums in a Massachusetts band under the name

'Bollywood'.

However, Ferdous was under constant surveillance for the last 9 months and presented no actual danger, said Ortiz.

During this time the agents recorded multiple conversations in which Ferdous laid out plans for the aerial attack. He also travelled to Washington to do surveillance taking pictures of his targets, the authorities added.

If convicted, Ferdous faces up to 15 years in prison for supporting a foreign terrorist organization, up to 20 years for attempting to destroy national defence sites, and the same again for attempting to use explosives against buildings owned by the United States.