

Violence kills 78 in Afghanistan

Karzai points finger at Pakistan

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai blamed Pakistani extremists yesterday for an unprecedented attack on Shia Muslims in Kabul that killed 55 people, demanding justice from the government in Islamabad.

By pointing the finger at the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi militant group, Karzai threatens to ratchet up tensions with neighbouring Pakistan just days after Islamabad boycotted the Bonn conference on the future of Afghanistan.

Afghan officials fear that Tuesday's killings in Kabul and the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif could unleash Iraq and Pakistan-style sectarian violence ahead of the scheduled departure of Nato combat troops in 2014.

Another 19 people died yesterday in a road-side bombing in the southern province of Helmand, bringing to 78 the number of people killed in just over 24 hours. Four people were killed near a mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif.

"We will pursue this issue with Pakistan and its government very seriously," said

Karzai as he visited wounded survivors of the attack after cancelling a planned trip to Britain and rushing home from Germany.

There have been media reports of a purported claim from Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, which is linked to Al-Qaeda and blamed for killing thousands of Shias in Pakistan but not thought previously to have attacked within Afghanistan.

"Lashkar-i-Jhangvi is based in Pakistan, therefore the government of Afghanistan with all its strength and international support will pursue this issue, Afghanistan cannot ignore the blood of its children," Karzai said.

Afghans traditionally blame Pakistanis for fuelling much of the violence in their country, where the Taliban are leading a 10-year insurgency against Karzai's government and 140,000 Western troops.

The US embassy in Kabul confirmed that an American was among those killed on Tuesday, in the Afghan capital where the victims were buried at peaceful mass gatherings with police on standby for violence which failed to materialise.

BNP rejects probe report

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"The probe body chief was an active worker of Rajshahi University Chhatra League [pro-Awami League student body]. Even he sought party nomination in the last general elections. So a neutral report cannot be expected of him," the BNP leader alleged.

The minorities are rather being persecuted during the present government's tenure, mentioned Fakhru. "We are collecting documents and evidences. The accused will be tried if BNP is voted to power."

Former ministers Tariqul Islam, Maj (ret) Hafizuddin Ahmed and Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, among others, were present.

The government on December 27, 2009 formed the three-member commission, headed by retired district judge Mohammad

Sahabuddin, to probe the atrocities carried out against members of a minority community and the then opposition parties after the 2001 elections.

The judicial probe commission has found 26,352 people, including 25 ministers and lawmakers of the then BNP-Jamaat alliance government, involved in crimes, Home Minister Sahara Khatun told newsmen at her secretariat office on November 30.

The crimes including murder, rape, arson and looting were committed in the 15 months following October 2001, she added.

POLITICAL WORKSHOP

BNP acting secretary general yesterday said the country's development is not possible without practicing knowledge-based politics and that is why political leaders and activists should be trained up.

Fakhru was addressing the inaugural session of a daylong political workshop of the party at a city hotel.

Citing the commencement of mass upsurges in the Middle East through the social network website "Facebook", he also stressed on technology-based political activities.

BNP standing committee member Dr Abdul Moyeen Khan also addressed the session, with party's training affairs secretary Kazi Asaduzzaman in the chair.

Some 55 leaders of BNP and its front and associate organisations took part in the workshop.

On October 16, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia formally inaugurated the party's political training programme at her Gulshan office.

Repatriation

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"We would take back all Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh after verifying them and as per agreed criterion between the two countries," he said.

A working group could also be established to resolve the issue permanently, Hasina told the Myanmar president.

The discussion was held in an atmosphere of understanding and mutual respect, PM's Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad told reporters after the meeting.

Wide range of issues including cooperation in energy sector, creating direct road and air links, enhancing trade, combating climate change and cooperation in education, rural development and tourism sectors also came up for discussion, Azad said.

During the visit, the two sides signed an agreement on the formation of a joint commission at the level of foreign ministers which is

expected to oversee and coordinate all bilateral issues in an institutional frame.

A memorandum of understanding on the establishment of a joint business council was also signed between Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry and Union of Myanmar Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

During the bilateral talks Hasina said Bangladesh is ready for investment in any hydropower project in Myanmar as equity basis or as a direct purchaser.

Since Myanmar is a dependable friend, it could share its hydro-electricity potential with Bangladesh after meeting its own home demand, she added.

"Bangladesh would also likely to import gas for power generation, fertiliser production and industrial manufacturing from Myanmar," the premier said.

Hasina also proposed for development of multimodal communications system between the two countries to give the development prospects a real shape as well as make true the dream of Asian Highway Network.

She also stressed the need for revival of the direct shipping services between Chittagong-Sittwe-Yangon and Air Transport Agreement of 1977 to resume direct air link between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

On the climate change issue, Hasina said, "The two countries could share their experiences in disaster management, adaptation and mitigation for their safeguards."

The premier also congratulated the president and the people of Myanmar on successful general elections held in November, 2010. She also felicitated Myanmar on its election as the chairman of the Asean for 2014.

A 15-point joint statement, issued after the bilateral talks, also suggested that businessmen and entrepreneurs of the both the countries take advantage of the opportunities for extending bilateral cooperation in the area of tourism development.

Earlier, Hasina was accorded a ceremonial reception with Guard of Honour at the Presidential Office.

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, Ambassador-at-Large Mohammad Ziauddin, Foreign Secretary Mijarul Quayes, among others, assisted the prime minister during the talks.

Later, Hasina laid the foundation stone of Bangladesh chancery in the newly created diplomatic zone of Nay Pyi Taw. She also met Bangladesh community members living in Myanmar.

The prime minister also exchanged views with the members of Bangladesh business delegation at hotel Yadamar Theindha.

In the evening, the Myanmar president hosted a state banquet in honour of the Bangladesh premier and her delegation.

A 40-member business delegation headed by FBCCI President AK Azad was also accompanying the prime minister, who reached Bali, Indonesia yesterday ending her three-day official visit to Myanmar.

BONN CONFERENCE

Long-term help pledged

AFP, Bonn

A major conference Monday on Afghanistan's future after Nato combat troops leave in 2014 pledged sustained support for another decade, in exchange for clear progress on good governance.

Participants including US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon vowed to stand by Afghanistan as it struggles to establish security and stability.

President Hamid Karzai told around 1,000 delegates gathered in the western German city of Bonn for the one-day meeting that his government needed long-term international backing.

The meeting came 10 years after another conference here put an interim Afghan government under Karzai in place after US-led troops ousted the Taliban in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

Rich nations

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until all countries find a way of sorting out a new legally binding mechanism in which all countries will be participants.

Negotiators think that the lowest possible outcome of the Durban climate conference could be that the EU will 'pledge' to cut their emission but will not enter the second commitment through an agreement. Meanwhile, other countries which are not in the Kyoto protocol will discuss and find a way to enter it at a later date.

A harder proposition is that the countries which signed the protocol to cut their emission will not ratify the second commitment but will agree to enter it provided the other big polluters commit themselves to cutting their emissions too.

But this looks difficult to achieve because the US is in a mood to talk out the conference without any commitment.

"As the situation evolves now, it seems that Kyoto will be left on life support," said Dr Saleemul Haque, senior research fellow of the International Institute for Environment and Development.

There is also talk about reviewing the achievements of the Kyoto Protocol in 2015. The BASIC group comprising Brazil, South Africa, India and China -- countries which are under tremendous pressure to legally bind their emissions, have taken a position that it should be reviewed as to how far the countries which had agreed in Kyoto to cut emissions had kept their commitment. BASIC has demanded this as a pressure tactic as evidence is clear that the Kyoto countries did not cut their emission as promised.

In such a situation, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has noted that if the current rate of carbon emission

continues, global temperature will rise by up to 3 degree Celsius from the pre-industrial period by the end of this century. But the last climate conference in Cancun had targeted keeping it at 2 degrees although the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) had demanded a cap of 1.5 degree Celsius.

"It was agreed at the Kyoto conference that greenhouse gas emission would be reduced by 5 percent from the 1990 level. Instead, it has risen by 17 percent, making the situation even more precarious and reaching almost a tipping point," said Dr Atiq Rahman, executive director of Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS).

Meanwhile, the LDCs have called on the developed countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emission by at least 45 percent below 1990 levels by 2020 and at least 95 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.

Mega projects go haywire

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route in line with the air force's recommendation. This change has slowed down the project's Japanese financing, which was earlier ready to go.

The construction of the 21-kilometre elevated expressway has not started even 10 months after the signing of a deal with the contractor. This project stalled mainly because the contractor could not manage funds for the job while the government is yet to finish acquiring land for the mega construction.

A two-year-old plan for Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) between Sadarghat and Gazipur via the airport is also stuck in bureaucratic bottlenecks.

Similarly, the communications ministry floated an idea of constructing elevated U-turns and underpasses for uninterrupted traffic flow between Azimpur and Gabtoli, which also got entangled in red tape and did not evolve as a project to be executed due to a fund crunch.

The government had placed the highest emphasis on upgrading the two-lane Dhaka-Chittagong highway into four lanes at a cost of Tk 2,300 crore. But till date, the progress of the project has been so disappointing that it will take many extra years to be completed.

The project's contractors have stopped or slowed down work due to hindrances by extortionists, politicians and even parliamentarians. For its part, the government did not take any successful measures to stop such illegal activities.

The work on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway was supposed to be completed by December 2013, but as the reality stands only 17 percent progress has been made so far. Upgrading the highway is vital for the coun-

try's economic growth.

The Tk 904-crore project to widen the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway has become even more uncertain as one of the bidders who obtained a good part of the job turned out to have won the tender by submitting fake documents. So the government has cancelled the bid for constructing 30km of the 87km highway while the bidder has sued the communications ministry. The progress of the remaining part is also unsatisfactory.

Padma Bridge

The future of the \$2.97 billion project had plunged into uncertainty as the prime minister took a long time to take action against the former communications minister.

Instead of addressing the WB challenge brought against Abul Hossain a couple of months ago, the government made a move to construct the 2nd Padma Bridge, apparently in a counter action against the WB stance. It has relied on a casual fund assurance from a Malaysian company. Sources, however, said Malaysia itself was sitting on several infrastructure projects due to fund crunch.

The feasibility study and design of the Padma Bridge were completed in 2010 and the construction work was supposed to begin in 2011 with a target of finishing it by 2014. The government by this time has spent over Tk 1,000 crore for the design, land acquisition, compensation and rehabilitation of the affected people. It signed loan agreements of \$1.2 billion with the WB, \$615 million with Asian Development Bank, \$140 million with Islamic Development Bank and \$400 million with Japan International Cooperative Agency (Jica). Despite that the future of the Padma

Bridge is bleak.

Now that the situation is going out of hand, the government has shifted the target toward starting the construction work by the end of its tenure subject to availability of funds. The 6.15 kilometre bridge will connect the south-western parts of the country with the capital and save numerous working hours along with reducing transport cost significantly.

Metro Rail

The metro rail, to be constructed from Uttara Third Phase to Sayedabad, is crucial for the capital as it will facilitate transport for around 60,000 people an hour during the peak time, says a Jica study. But repeated modification of alignment is delaying its construction.

Jica, which is keen to provide 80 per cent of the estimated \$2.8 billion project, completed the feasibility study in 2010. The environmental study and loan negotiation were supposed to be completed by 2011 to launch the construction in 2012.

The Bangladesh Air Force raised objections to the proposed 19-metre high metro rail along Bijoy Sarani, arguing that it would hinder military air operations from the Tejgaon airstrip. The air force made a plea that the airfield be kept functional. The prime minister opted for the realignment of the metro rail's route along the parliament complex in line with the air force's suggestion, a move that drew huge flak from different technical experts.

In February, the government modified the route as it was overlapping with the Gulistan-Jatrabari flyover. **Dhaka Elevated Expressway** Construction of the Tk 8,703-crore ambitious infra-

structure was supposed to kick-off by July 19 this year. The government has shifted its target date to March next year as it failed to remove structures and acquire land along the route, while the project contractor, Ital-Thai, could not arrange necessary fund.

The authorities could not resolve all of the 17 direct and indirect conflicting points the expressway would encounter with other ongoing infrastructure projects.

On January 19 this year, the government signed a deal with Ital-Thai to construct the four-lane expressway from Shahjalal International Airport to Kutubkhali on the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway under a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) project.

As per the deal, construction should be completed by June 2014, which in present context is not feasible.

Big chance missed in Bonn

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impression that Pakistan was the root cause of all the problems in Afghanistan but many other international leaders, including Hillary Clinton, were very much careful in their remarks about Pakistan.

Karzai was expecting a big condemnation of Pakistan from European countries but his hopes never materialized. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon met Karzai one night before the Bonn conference and urged him not to say anything against Pakistan. Ban Ki Moon met this scribe immediately after his meeting with Karzai along with some Afghan journalists. He said, "We cannot move ahead without Pakistan and Pakistan will respect the announcements made at the Bonn conference." Ban Ki Moon was stunned when a senior Afghan journalist, Dr. Hussain Yasa, started speaking against Karzai and said that Karzai was not competent enough to lead a peace process in Afghanistan.

Many analysts feared that Pakistan would be completely isolated after the boycott of the Bonn conference but Pakistan successfully gave out a strong message to the international community that enough was enough and there would be no more dictation from the US. Some top European diplomats were very much disappointed at the absence of Pakistan from the Bonn conference and one of them commented that another Iran was in the making in the neighborhood of Iran.

High level European diplomats involved in the designing of a roadmap for peace in Afghanistan revealed that a big breakthrough was expected in Bonn but an unfortunate incident in the Mohmand area had sabotaged everything. The Taliban were

ready to start formal talks with Nato countries after the Bonn conference and they were given assurances that they would be permitted to establish a diplomatic office in a Muslim country other than Pakistan. German officials even discussed some names for an international facilitator for making the talks go smooth with the Taliban. Pakistan definitely played an important role in convincing the Taliban to go ahead and gave many assurances on behalf of the international community.

German government officials even spoke to Indians in order to make sure that India did not raise any objections on the main role of Pakistan in the Afghan peace process. A top level Indian army official traveled to Germany and met members of the South Asia Friendship group of the German parliament. He discussed the role of Pakistan in making a roadmap. Besides, many things were finalized. After the US bombing in the Mohmand area Pakistan only wanted an apology from the US to save face on the domestic front, but thus US refused to offer an apology and that was how a big opportunity in Bonn was turned into chaos.

Germany's special ambassador for Pakistan and Afghanistan Mike Steiner was very much hopeful till Sunday night that at least the Pakistan ambassador in Germany would participate at the Bonn conference. The German government requested the US for providing a face saving measure to Pakistani leaders but US President Obama was not ready to make a public apology. He called Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari but only regretted the Mohmand incident. He never apologized. In a detailed meeting with this scribe, ambassador Steiner

said that the absence of Pakistan was a big setback to the Bonn conference. He was hopeful that Pakistan would come back to Afghan the peace process very soon.

Paul Lehrieder, member of the German parliament, told me that he met the former foreign minister of the Taliban regime Wakil Ahmad Mutawakkal along with some other Taliban leaders last week in Berlin and discussed the roadmap for peace in Afghanistan in detail. He is a member of the South Asia group of the German parliament and he confirmed his meetings with an Indian army official but he said that with a lot of disappointment that the US bombing destroyed the Bonn conference and after the boycott of Pakistan everything had changed. He said that there would be no peace in Afghanistan without Pakistan.

Another German diplomat revealed that a close relative of Mullah Omar and a former Taliban official Tayab Agha was also engaged by them long ago but the US bombing in Pakistan had created many complications and 'ultimately we lost everything along with US and Karzai.' Tayab Agha told German officials that Pakistan 'abandoned us in 2001 just for the US and paid a very heavy price.' After 10 years of partnership Pakistan is now not ready to trust the US? how can now Taliban trust US? The message from the Bonn conference is very much clear. The boycott by Pakistan highlighted a dead end in the peace outreach and the complete failure on the part of the US to get Pakistani help in Afghanistan. Pakistan took a big risk by not going to the Bonn conference but it has finally established the US as the main troublemaker for peace in Afghanistan.

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